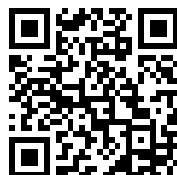
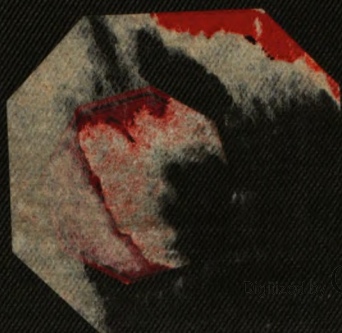

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**With the
48th Division in Italy**

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California

TO VIND
ARROGIA



MAJOR-GENERAL SIR ROBERT FANSHAWE, K.C.B., D.S.O.,
COMMANDING 48TH DIVISION, 1915-1918.

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA
With the
48th Division in Italy

BY

LIEUTENANT-COLONEL
GEORGE HENRY BARNETT

C.M.G., D.S.O.

A.A. & Q.M.G., 48TH DIVISION, 1917 TO 1919

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

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PREFACE.

TO THE READER.

The following pages are not meant to be a history of the 48th Division in the Italian campaign. It is to be earnestly hoped that some one will come forward in the future who has the time and ability to write the whole history of the Division throughout the Great War.

The present little book is simply a narrative compiled from the writer's own diary and personal notes. If it proves of any interest to those who served with the Division and their relatives and friends, and if any facts are narrated which may be of use to the future divisional historian, the object will have been achieved.

My excuse for writing it is that in the first place very little has been written concerning the part played by the British troops in the Italian campaign, and the general public is somewhat ignorant of this phase of the war, and inclined to treat it as

an unimportant side-show. To those who take up this attitude I would like to put the question as to what would have been the eventual result if Italy had made a separate peace? What would have happened to our line of communication with Salonika, Egypt, and India? How should we have carried on the war with the Mediterranean under complete enemy domination? The consideration of such an eventuality is not pleasant. That such a danger existed is in my opinion indubitable. After Caporetto, Italy was for a few months very badly shaken; and, though she made a marvellous recovery, there were times of extreme peril at the end of 1917 and at the beginning of 1918. The moral effect of Allied support at this juncture was inestimable. The material support rendered later on by the British and French contingents, although of less effect regarding the ultimate issue, without doubt conduced to hasten the Austrian debacle.

Secondly, it has seemed to me a pity that some of the unique features of the actual operations and the supply system in Italy should not be recorded. Thirdly, the 48th Division had the good fortune to establish two different records—that of being the first to enter enemy territory on the Western Front during the war, and that of capturing by far the largest number of prisoners and guns in forty-eight hours of any Allied division.

If certain interesting incidents are omitted and

some units consider that their achievements have not been sufficiently chronicled, I hasten to apologise for the omission. It has been impossible to get into touch with all the unit commanders eighteen months after the end of the war, and after this lapse of time one's memory is apt to be at fault. I have tried, however, to be as accurate as possible, and I ask the readers' indulgence towards a novice who has never before attempted anything in the nature of a publication.

G. H. B.

FOREWORD.

By **LIEUTENANT-GENERAL SIR H. B. WALKER,**
K.C.B., K.C.M.G., D.S.O.

IT was my good fortune to command the 48th (South Midland) Division during the final operations on the Asiago Plateau, and I have been accorded by the writer of the following pages the opportunity of paying tribute to the officers, N.C.O.'s, and men of the Regular and Territorial Armies who served under me.

Before going to Italy, the Division had earned its laurels in many engagements in France, including the Battles of the Somme and the Third Battle of Ypres, under the leadership of Sir Robert Fanshawe, who, by his example, had endeared himself to all ranks, and had created that "esprit-de-corps" which exists to the present day. The Division was continually in the line without relief from 23rd July to 11th November 1918, during which time it perpetually raided the enemy lines with invariable success, and, in the final advance, traversed some 60 kilometres of mountainous country in three days, when over 20,000 prisoners and hundreds of guns fell into its hands.

Although the permanent commands of Brigades were held by officers of the Regular Army, these appointments were often held temporarily by Territorial Lieut.-Colonels, who performed their duties with success and distinction. Almost all the commanding officers of units were in civil life professional or business men, and the junior officers were in the same category. They acquitted themselves right well, and by their success the ability of the Territorial Army to take its place in the field was never more completely proved.

I must not omit a reference to the staffs of the Division and Brigades. Though the senior appointments were held by officers of the Regular Army, practically all the junior posts were filled by officers of the Territorial or New Armies, and I may say that I never wish to be better served.

As regards the rank and file, their fighting record speaks for itself. When out of the line their behaviour in billets was the subject of comment and praise from the various mayors and town authorities.

Owing to a crisis in Egypt early in 1919, certain units had to be sent there from Italy. Many officers and other ranks who were due, and over-due, for demobilisation were included, yet their despatch was effected without murmur or protest—sure evidence of an admirable and soldierly spirit.

Since the reconstitution of the Territorial Army, the confidence felt that the South Midlands would respond has been justified. In spite of the aftermath of war and business difficulties, many old officers and other ranks who fought not only with 1st and 2nd Line Divisions, but with South Midland

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units in other Divisions, have rejoined, and by their efforts have recreated their units.

In view of the reduction of the Regular Army, this country must learn to look upon the Territorial Army as its main support for defence against aggression, and it cannot show its interest better than by fostering and maintaining the county spirit.

H. B. WALKER,
Lieut.-General,
Commanding 48th (South Midland) Division.

OXFORD, *March* 1923.

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WITH THE 48TH DIVISION IN ITALY.



CHAPTER I.

ARRIVAL IN ITALY.

AT the beginning of November 1917 the 48th Division was holding that sector of the British line immediately in front of the Vimy Ridge.

The sector was a very quiet one, and the Division was in the course of regaining its breath after the buffeting it had received during the months of August, September, and October in the incessant and exhausting fighting in the third battle of Ypres.

News had been received of the Italian disaster at Caporetto, and, as usual in these cases, little time elapsed before rumours were current that the Division would proceed to Italy.

Most of us did not pay much attention to these rumours to start with—we had heard them before,—but on 10th November we received sudden orders that we were to be withdrawn from the line within a fortnight, and to entrain immediately the relief

was complete. We were told that we were to form part of the force of six divisions under Sir Herbert Plumer to be sent to the assistance of the Italians. This news was received with rather mixed feelings. On the whole, I think the rank and file were pleased at the idea. Anything was better than a return to the mud and misery of Flanders. Some of the officers, however, viewed the new adventure with considerable misgivings—the news from Italy appeared to be worse every day, and it certainly seemed as if we might only arrive in time to be present at a debacle of the first magnitude.

On the 16th an advance party consisting of seven officers, of which I was one, and nine other ranks started, and, after spending one day in Paris, left by the Modane express on the evening of the 17th.

We had managed to find one man, a gunner, who could speak Italian, but, apart from him, not one of us knew a word of the language. On the 16th in Paris we reported at the Headquarters Mediterranean Lines of Communication. Here, however, we could get little information, except that we were to go to Arquata, which place we were unable to find on any map. We heard that Sir H. Plumer and his staff had already gone on, and were believed to be at Mantua.

We arrived at Modane at 10 A.M. on the 18th, and went on to Turin the same afternoon. We decided to stay the night there, and wire for instructions as to our further movements.

That evening I well remember how the difficulties of not speaking Italian first asserted themselves. We had been advised by the R.T.O. to dine

at the Ristorante Molinari. We wandered round Turin in the dark trying to find this place, and all our efforts at asking the direction from passers-by ended in utter failure. It was only by good luck that we eventually hit on a kind old lady who could speak French, and at once showed us where we wanted to go.

After an excellent dinner we went to the opera, where we saw a first-rate performance of 'Faust,' only paying forty-two lire—about twenty-three shillings at the ruling exchange—for a most commodious box. We were particularly struck at Turin by the very large number of young men of military age not in uniform. Of course we did not realise at the time that the reason for this was that Turin is by far the largest manufacturing town in Italy, and that these young men were practically all engaged in the Government war munitions factories. On returning to our hotel after the opera we found a wire from G.H.Q. ordering us to proceed to Mantua, or Mantova, as we now learned to call it.

We started at 6 A.M. on the following morning in a very slow and cold train, reached Milan at noon, where we had a hurried luncheon, and started on again at 1 P.M. This journey was most tedious: the train seemed to stop at every station, and very frequently at no station at all, for indefinite periods. The country was monotonous: dead flat, with row after row of interminable mulberry-trees. We passed the time studying Italian conversation manuals and trying to learn certain Italian words, which of course we pronounced in a manner absolutely incomprehensible to any Italian.

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I remember an incident occurred between two of our party which made us chuckle at the time.

A (reading aloud from an Italian grammar). "Is your father tall?"

B (sitting next to him and awaking from a contemplative study of the endless mulberry-trees). "My father has been dead for seven years!"

It got dark about 5, and we wondered if we were ever going to get to our destination, but we eventually turned up at Mantova at about 7.30 P.M.

This town appeared to be a regular pandemonium: the station and streets were packed with Italian soldiers and officers of apparently every Allied nationality.

After some trouble we succeeded in finding G.H.Q., and managed to get a small lorry from them to bring our baggage from the station. The next thing was to find accommodation, and after some search we eventually got two rooms between the seven of us at the Hotel Simone.

Here we demanded dinner, and after a lot of fuss we got a meal consisting of watery soup, stewed veal, and black coffee. It was obvious that there was a great shortage of supplies in Mantova, which was not surprising considering the way the place was packed.

On the 20th H.¹ and I went to G.H.Q. to report, and were informed that we were to make our headquarters at Cologna Veneta, a small village some fifty kilometres to the north-east of Mantova.

We were provided with a car and an Italian officer

¹ H. = Lieut.-Colonel H. C. L. Howard, C.M.G., D.S.O., 16th Lancers, G.S.O.1 48th Division.

to act as interpreter, and started at 11 A.M. for Cologna Veneta. Our route lay through Sanguinetto and Legnago. At the former place we came on part of the 23rd Division, which had been detraining for some days, and was moving up to an area north-east of Cologna. It was quite cheering to see some of our own troops; they looked in splendid fettle, and obviously raised considerable curiosity and admiration amongst the Italian peasants. The well-ordered march discipline, spick-and-span transport, well-conditioned animals, and, above all, the cheerful and confident faces of the men, were already acting as a powerful antidote to the wave of depression which had been spreading over the civilian population of this part of Italy since Caporetto. Some ten miles beyond we came on our first sight of that part of the Italian Second Army which had been so roughly handled during the recent retreat.

It is not my intention here to go into the causes of the Caporetto disaster. It was, however, the first time that I had ever seen the retreat of an army which had been really badly knocked about, and it was a most depressing sight. The infantry were straggling along in a rough column; there was no march discipline; the men looked dispirited, apathetic, sullen, and, above all, dog-tired. They seemed to have hardly any arms and little food. Occasionally a group would fall out and cut up a dead ox by the side of the road, making a hasty meal of raw or half-cooked flesh.

Officers seemed scarce, and the few there were appeared no more confident than the men.

We passed about fifteen miles of these troops,

and at the end of the procession we gave vent to our thoughts. "Well, anyhow, these troops are finished and done with as far as this war is concerned; they will never fight again."

We were completely wrong. The Italian Second Army was certainly in a deplorable condition; but the authorities had gauged the situation accurately, knowing the psychology of the Italian soldier, and had decided that the correct solution was to get these troops right away from the front with the least possible delay and to retrain and equip them in reserve areas. This policy was so far successful that seven months later a large proportion of the troops we saw were successfully assisting to repel the great Austrian attack from Asiago to the sea, and four and a half months after that were marching with irresistible *élan* on Trieste and Trento.

Passing through Legnago, where Sir Herbert Plumer was just establishing his headquarters, we reached Cologne Veneta at about 1.30. We drove to the Municipio, where we were received by the Sindaco and Town Council. Coffee, biscuits, and *strega*¹ were served, and after a most cordial welcome we were advised to locate ourselves at an inn called the Alla Roca. Here we arranged for meals, bedrooms, and a sitting-room, and, having done this, returned to Mantova, stopping to have tea with the Headquarters of the 23rd Division at Sanguinetto *en route*.

It was on this day that we heard of the initial success of the Third Army at Cambrai, and any one

¹ *Strega*, a sweet Italian liqueur with a taste not very easily acquired by Englishmen.

who could translate Italian was in great demand to give us the latest news from the local papers.

The country through which we had motored on this day was dull, flat, and uninteresting; very enclosed, with small fields and endless mulberry-trees, the fields being divided by big unjumpable dykes.

The roads were good but rather narrow, with such a pronounced camber that the moment one got off the centre it was necessary to drive with extreme care for fear of a skid, which was likely to end in one finding one's self in a ten-foot-deep ditch.

It took some time for our British lorry-drivers to get used to driving on these roads, and during the first few weeks in the country the number of ditched and overturned lorries to be seen was considerable.

We remained at Mantova on the 21st, and the following day moved to Cologna Veneta, and installed our headquarters in the Alla Rocca.

We were ordered to prepare a billeting area for the Division in the neighbourhood, and were informed that the first troops would probably arrive on the 25th.

The next three days were therefore spent in tearing round the country in motor-cars trying to arrange billets for the Division on arrival.

It was no easy task. The inhabitants were distinctly afraid of British soldiers, never having seen any, and the local authorities had very little information to give us as to the amount of accommodation in the various villages.

On the 24th Captain Huntington of the 9th Lancieri Firenze was appointed as head Italian

Liaison Officer to the Division, and our task was made much easier. Although he was in the Italian Army, Captain Huntington's father was American and his mother English. He spoke Italian, French, English, and German perfectly, and what was of even more importance, he understood our ways and requirements.

XIVth Corps Headquarters had now moved to Lonigo, ten kilometres north of us, while G.H.Q. was transferred to Padova.

I cannot let this opportunity pass without paying a tribute to our hostess of the Alla Rocca. She made us extraordinarily comfortable. Her husband was away on service, but, aided by one maid-of-all-work and a small boy named Giovanni, she looked after us in a most excellent fashion, and fed us wonderfully. How she managed night after night to serve up a five-course dinner for seven hungry officers will always remain a mystery. The kitchen was desperately untidy, and usually full of live chickens, dogs, and apparently the whole of the living relations of the "signora." Two old women, who both looked at least ninety, appeared from nowhere in the early morning, and sat the whole day in front of the fireplace, taking up a large part of the room. There was practically no fuel. A few glowing mealie-stalks seemed to suffice, and out of all this the good lady would produce a dinner on the following lines: Chicken broth; omelette; roast veal or turkey with spinach and potatoes; some kind of sweet and savoury; cheese; coffee; and dessert.

This was served by the aforesaid Giovanni, a

small urchin of thirteen, who, if he lives long enough, will, I should imagine, finish up his days as head-waiter at the Carlton or Savoy. He certainly deserves to do so.

On the 24th we were informed that the Division would detrain at the stations of Isola-Della-Scalla, Bovolone, and Cerea, and were given a table showing the hours of arrival of the different units.

This seemed a simple and business-like arrangement, and we congratulated ourselves on the ease with which we should be able to detrain and concentrate the Division. A number of interpreters were allotted, and on the 24th we posted an officer at each of the three detraining stations with a number of interpreters and orders to be given to each O.C. unit on arrival as to destination. Transport was a difficulty, as the Corps could only allow us eight Fiat lorries for the whole division. However, we authorised each unit to hire local transport, and established a large dump of preserved rations and forage at Albaredo in the centre of our concentration area, which could be drawn on in case of emergency. Ration delivery by ordinary methods was out of the question, as our supply column was moving by road from France, and would not arrive until some days after the rest of the Division.

Our scheme looked all right on paper, but in point of fact nothing happened as we expected, and the detraining and concentration of the Division was only saved from chaos by good luck and the goodwill and hard work of all concerned.

A visit to the three detraining stations caused our first misgivings. At Isola there was certainly a

biggish siding, but at the other two there were no facilities for detraining guns, transport, and animals.

The line was single. The three station-masters, imposing-looking old men, wearing hats which can only be compared for magnificence to that worn by a marshal of France, were complacently optimistic that all would go well; but they did not seem to have made any special arrangements, and gave one the impression that they had had no previous experience in the detraining of large bodies of troops.

Then we received a message from Corps Headquarters warning us that the time-table could not be strictly relied on, which was shortly followed by an order changing our billeting area to one farther to the east.

It is only fair to say that these changes of area were due to the ever-changing situation. At one moment the news was good, and the Italians appeared to be holding their line well. At another moment all sorts of rumours of disasters and further retirements came through, and there is little doubt that during this period the Italian Higher Command were very seriously worried as to whether it would be possible to hold the line or whether another withdrawal on an even larger scale would not be necessary. Fortunately the Austrians had outstripped their supplies, and could no longer advance with such rapidity as before. Every day's delay was to our advantage: the battered troops of the Second Army were rapidly being got to the rear for reorganisation; fresh Italian divisions were being moved up; two British divisions (23rd and 41st) were already detrained, and were marching up

towards the Piave; while the 7th Division were detraining just in front of the 48th, and at least four French divisions had already arrived. The four British divisions were temporarily under the XIVth Corps, but we were informed that we should be transferred to the XIth Corps on its arrival from France.

To return to our detraining troubles. On the 25th no one arrived. On the early morning of the 26th some of our artillery arrived at Isola. The detraining took a very long time, and several trains were standing head to tail on the single line without being able to move for hours. We now heard that our troops might also arrive at Legnago, Bevilacqua, Montagnana, Este, Grisignano, and Pojana. These stations were scattered over an area of about forty kilometres from east to west, and some thirty from north to south. Units arrived in any order. In many cases half a battalion would arrive at, say, Cerea, and the other half forty kilometres away at Pojana. The next three days were a nightmare. We tore round the country trying to collect scattered units, and gradually to concentrate them by brigade groups. The transport difficulty soon became acute, and dumps of rations, blankets, &c., had to be left all over the place. To add to the troubles of unit commanders on arrival, more than half the so-called interpreters proved to be absolutely useless.

The fact was that under the stress of a continuous mass of troops arriving the railway system completely broke down, and trains were run into any siding which happened to be vacant, and the occupants told to detrain.

One unfortunate major in charge of half a battalion arrived at a small station near Mantova, where by signs and gestures he was told to detrain. No one met him: he had no interpreter and no orders. Having a general map of Italy, he marched east until he happened to meet some one who could talk English and knew sufficient of the situation to advise him to go to Isola, where he got in touch with the Division. Instances of this kind could be multiplied, but, fortunately for all, the weather was fine though cold, and every one arrived in a good humour. The novelty of a new country, the relief at being quit of Flanders, and the glamour of the journey through the Riviera, where the passing troops had been fêted at almost every station, atoned in a large degree for the discomforts and inconveniences of the detrainment and concentration. Some units had more luck than others. The 5th Gloucesters, who had detrained at two stations widely apart, concentrated quite by accident at Noventa Vicentina, the two half-battalions marching into the town simultaneously.

General Fanshawe and the remainder of the Divisional Headquarters arrived on the 29th, and we then received orders to move the Division north-east into an area just south-west of the river Bacciglione, with a view to preparing a reserve position there.

This entailed hard marching for all those portions of the Division which had detrained elsewhere than at Pojana or Grisignano. Several units marched an average of twenty kilometres a day for six consecutive days. The detrainment and forward concen-

tration continued until 4th December, on which date Divisional Headquarters were moved to Montegaldella, close to the Bacciglione, with the Division concentrated in an area of about twelve square kilometres south-west of that river. The intention at this time was that the Division was to be moved forward to be in reserve behind the Montello or the Piave further south. However, Austrian successes in the mountain area to the west of the Asiago Plateau caused apprehensions as to a possible breakthrough on that sector, and our march was accordingly diverted to the northwards, with a view to occupying a strategic position sufficiently close to the mountains to intervene immediately in case of further danger threatening in that locality.

Our headquarters at Montegaldella were established in a very large cold villa. We were woken up early on the 5th by the movement of troops, and found that during the night a French supply unit had marched in and billeted itself on the ground floor and in the gardens of the villa. I only quote this instance to show how complicated the billeting was at this period. No matter where a unit was ordered to go it was more than an even money chance that on arrival it would find the place already annexed by either Italian or French troops. Much tact, mutual forbearance, and goodwill were needed to avoid discourtesies or unpleasantnesses with our Allies.

From Montegaldella we moved Divisional Headquarters to Piazzola on the 5th, the units of the Division being moved on again and occupying an area Villa Franca, Camisano, Gromolo, Presina. In

this area we remained ten days, and the troops had some chance of resting and getting straight. The rear dumps were all collected, boots refitted and replenished, the ordinary ration system introduced, and a chance given to every one to get acclimatised and used to the new surroundings.

Piazzola was the biggest house I ever saw. It now belonged to a millionaire cloth manufacturer, but had at one time been the summer palace of the Doges of Venice. The state-rooms were shut up and in charge of a caretaker. We had access to the remainder of the palace, and installed ourselves with what comfort we could; but it was desperately cold.

The lack of fuel at this time became really serious. Wood was rationed as carefully as sugar and butter at home. It is a fact that during the winter of 1917-18 the Italian military authorities had to order the wholesale felling of olive-trees—probably the most valuable growing wood in the world—in order to keep the necessary military trains going.

People in England who grumbled at the fuel shortage can have no conception of the straits to which Italy was reduced at this period. The fact of having money made little difference. The stuff simply did not exist in the country.

In one respect, however, Northern Italy is very far ahead of us, and that is in the use of electric power. This is, of course, supplied by the mountain streams, and the poorest cottage has its electric light at a ridiculously low cost.

Barring the fuel difficulty, the troops really now began to enjoy themselves, and were soon on the

friendliest terms with the inhabitants. Poultry, eggs, and pigs were plentiful, and at first cheap. Later the prices went up with a run, but during the first few weeks it was possible to buy an excellent turkey for about eight lire (four shillings).

Officers and men worked hard at learning Italian, and soon picked up sufficient to bargain over the price of a dozen eggs or the payment for a billet. In fact our "acclimatising" proceeded apace, and the Division became every day more ready to fight side by side with its Italian Allies.

CHAPTER II.

VARIOUS BILLETING AREAS AND THE MONTELLO.

As events turned out, it proved to be a long time before we were called upon to take any active part in the operations on the Italian Front. The Division remained in the Piazzola area until the 14th December, and nothing of particular interest happened. The XIth Corps, under Lieut.-General Sir R. C. B. Haking, had now arrived, and had established their headquarters at Campo S. Piero. The Division was transferred to this Corps, which was now composed of Corps troops and the 48th and 5th Divisions, the latter being in the process of arriving.

On the 8th I had my first experience of a visit to the mountains, as I was sent with an officer from Corps Headquarters and a liaison officer to visit the headquarters of the 22nd Italian Corps at Lusiana. We started early, and motored *via* Sandrigo to Breganze, whence the road started to ascend from the plains.

Lusiana is about 2000 feet above Breganze, and the distance as the crow flies some six kilometres; but so cunningly had the road been constructed that one never seemed to be on a really steep gradient. Comparisons as to the merits of the different armies

fighting in the great European War are unsatisfactory, but I do not think that any one who has been on the Italian Front will challenge the statement that in road-making, and especially mountain road-making, the Italian engineers are first by a very long way.

This particular road was a double-lorry way, and wound up the most vicious-looking valleys and cliffs, but by the aid of many hairpin corners and the utilisation of detours, it was as easy for a motor-lorry or bus to ascend it as to go up Ludgate Hill. One was particularly impressed with the wide sweep of the hairpin turns, enabling any motor vehicle with a good lock to get round without reversing. The surface was excellent. At intervals one would see one or two very old men or children, who were told off for attending to the road. They never appeared to be doing any hard work, but, as we learnt later, they were all experts at their job, and kept the road in its magnificent condition by the immediate application of the correct repair to the slightest bit of wear and tear. Months afterwards, when we had to keep up one of these roads with our own unskilled labour, we appreciated the value of these expert civilians. I think the majority of people who go up one of these roads for the first time are inclined to lean inwards when going round the sharpest turns, and don't quite like the look of another vehicle twenty feet above one going in the opposite direction; but one soon gets used to it, and can settle down comfortably to enjoy the magnificent scenery.

We reached Lusiana about 11. This place is rather

more than half-way up to the plateau on which the actual front was situated. There were about three inches of snow on the ground, and it was fairly cold. As we had come on "Q." business to ascertain the methods of supply, feeding, and clothing arrangements, &c., for troops in the mountains, we closeted ourselves with the senior "Q." staff officer of the Corps for an hour and a half, and attempted to pick his brains.

The interview was not entirely satisfactory. What seemed commonplace and perfectly ordinary to him was entirely novel to us, and I am afraid he thought us rather fools, owing to the number of questions we asked. However, he was most courteous, and we gained a certain amount of useful information.

After the interview we were entertained at lunch by Lieut.-General Gatti and a numerous staff, who were all extremely kind and cordial.

It struck us that the General and most of his officers were somewhat worried and apprehensive of another big Austrian attack, and they made no secret of their hopes of a heavy fall of snow, which would render further enemy operations impossible in the mountain district. We returned to the plains by a different road *viâ* Marostica, which is an extremely picturesque old town with battlements on all sides.

On the 13th, 14th, and 15th the Division moved northwards into an area west of Cittadella, on each side of the river Brenta.

This area was strategically well placed for the rôle of the Division, which was to reinforce the mountain front to the north of Marostica in case of

emergency, but in every other way it was thoroughly bad. Billeting accommodation was scanty and poor, communications were bad, and there was very little land for training facilities and games.

The move into the area was most uncomfortable, as the villages were crowded with Italian troops, although we had been assured that they would be cleared out. These troops, however, had either received no orders, or declined to carry them out, and it was only by dint of hard pushing and a good deal of firmness that the Division succeeded in squashing itself in.

We had Divisional Headquarters at Pozzoleone, a miserable little hamlet, in which were also billeted two of our battalions—the 5th and 7th Royal Warwicks—and a brigade of Italian infantry.

The Brigade Groups were eventually placed as follows : 145th Brigade in Tezze and neighbourhood, 143rd round Pozzoleone, 144th Sandrigo, Divisional Artillery at Longa and Maragnole, Pioneers at Schiavon. The move was not really completed until the 23rd ; the weather was cold and wet, and we had a certain amount of snow. It became increasingly difficult to keep the men employed and amused, owing to the aforesaid difficulties of obtaining fields for training and recreation purposes.

The Italian General Commanding the Brigade at Pozzoleone, by name de Lucca, was very keen to instil into his troops that keenness on games which is inherent in the British soldier, and suggested to the C.O. of one of the Warwick battalions that his men should play ours at football. This suggestion was readily taken up, but the battalion concerned

was rather taken aback when the General suggested that the match should be played every morning at 6.30 A.M. ! However, a mutual understanding was soon arrived at, and many matches were played between the various Italian and British units in the afternoons, which were of the greatest value in cementing the friendship between the two allies.

General de Lucca was a great believer in fostering this spirit. On New Year's Day his brigade band turned up at about 10 A.M. outside our headquarters, and gave us an impromptu serenade. After various selections they gave us the Italian National Anthem, followed by "Rule Britannia," played very fast, with the same sort of rhythm as a popular Jazz tune. The gallant General, who came with the band, explained that he had sent his bandmaster specially to Milan to obtain the "British National Anthem." This was the result, and we, I hope, expressed our appreciation, and were careful not to enlighten him, and not to throw any cold water on his kindly thought by explaining what the "British National Anthem" really was.

The supplying of the Division was one of extreme difficulty at this period, as there had been no time to accumulate reserve dumps of sufficient size in the forward area, and we were therefore almost entirely dependent on the arrival of the supply-train at our railhead, Carmignano Di Brenta, for our daily food-supply. As the railway system was still very disorganised, it may be imagined that we had some pretty anxious moments, and on more than one occasion we were only saved from temporary starvation by good luck. On at least three occasions there

were no rations whatever available until eighteen hours after they should have been delivered to the troops, and certain units, which had not had the opportunity or foresight to build up a small reserve, went breakfastless. The Divisional train and supply-column worked manfully under the most adverse circumstances. The British private invariably blames the R.A.S.C. if there is the slightest hitch in the feeding arrangements, and, when all goes well, he takes it as a matter of course, and seldom if ever gives a word of thanks. However, the R.A.S.C. work steadily on, undeterred by criticism, and they have the satisfaction of knowing that one of the most marvellous achievements of the war is the way in which the fighting soldier has had his rations, practically without exception, during the whole campaign.

At this period no canteen stores had arrived in the country. We had ordered various truck-loads from France, but, in view of the disorganised state of the railway system, we became very anxious as Christmas drew nearer and nothing turned up. However, fortune favoured us, and on the 23rd three trucks of luxuries turned up, and thereafter, though somewhat irregular, canteen supplies were fairly adequate.

Most of the units had a very successful Christmas. They had been able to buy turkeys or pigs, and, with the aid of ration plum-puddings, canteen stores, and beer from Padova, they were able to give their men the best Christmas dinner during the war. The day was cold and wet. There were parade services in the morning, dinner at midday, and

football in the afternoon, and I think most people enjoyed themselves.

In accordance with the rôle of the Division, daily reconnaissances were made of the reserve lines in the mountains to the north of Marostica and Breganze.

Parties of officers and N.C.O.'s from various units in turn were taken up in Fiat lorries, while the General had a sort of informal staff ride two or three times a week, so that in case of emergency we should have been able to move up and occupy the necessary positions with a fair amount of expedition. Routes were carefully reconnoitred, and plans worked out for a sudden move to any threatened point. In addition we were ordered to send a staff officer daily to visit the headquarters of the two Italian divisions on our immediate front, in order to establish liaison and to furnish a daily report on the actual situation.

On 4th January I went on a very interesting expedition with the General and Howard to the Lake Garda front. Starting at 7 A.M., we picked up an Italian Liaison Officer from the Second Army at Vicenza, and then proceeded by Verona and S. Ambrogio up the valley of the Adige to Borghetto.

The scenery was magnificent, the road winding up a steep gorge with the river on our left and precipitous cliffs to the right, while, on the far side of the river, the ground rises equally abruptly to Monte Baldo and Altissimo. The Adige is of an average width of 300 feet here, and an immense volume of turgid water full of large blocks of ice was coming down. The gorge is gloomy and forbidding at this

time of the year, as, owing to the height of the mountains on each side, the sun never gets down to the centre, and the road and villages abutting on to it are in perpetual shade. Just south of Borghetto we crossed the frontier into Austria, and it was with some satisfaction that we found ourselves on enemy territory for the first time during the war. The Corps Headquarters was at Borghetto, but we were directed on to the Divisional Headquarters at Ala, some ten miles farther on, which place we reached about 11.30. Ala is a dirty little Austrian village, rather knocked about by shell-fire. It might be very picturesque in the summer, but at this time of year was gloomy in the extreme.

At the Divisional Headquarters we were told we might go up to the front line on Coni Zeugna, a mountain some 6000 feet in height, so we started the climb in two light open Fiat cars. This trip really was rather hair-raising. The road is very narrow and rough, with only occasional passing places, and with a gradient of one in ten to one in six most of the way. One seemed to be going round a hair-pin corner every few yards: there were no guard rails, the outer edge of the road was not revetted, and one had an uneasy feeling that the slightest skid would send one over a nasty drop of a thousand feet or so.

However, we arrived safely at a point about 600 feet from the summit at about 1 A.M., where we were met by the commander of the Alpini battalion holding the line.

Here we had "crapons," or spiked sandals, strapped on to our boots, and were each given an alpenstock, as the whole surface of the ground was hard-frozen

snow and ice, and it was unsafe to try to walk without these adjuncts.

The weather was perfect although bitterly cold.

The Colonel led us up to the summit of Zeugna and round his trenches, which were cut out of the solid rock. The mountain was also liberally tunnelled; I think we were told that altogether there were seven kilometres of tunnels in the sector of his battalion. The view from the top was magnificent. One could see Rovereto and Trento, while, in the distance, the high Alps showed up in ridge after ridge as far as the eye could reach.

To our right were the rugged peaks of Pasubio, where the front trenches were in places within a few yards of one another, the scene of much fighting and mining activity; to our left the mountains dipped steeply to the Adige valley; while beyond one could just catch a glimpse of Garda. At first sight the place looked impregnable, but one must remember that in a position of this sort there is bound to be any amount of dead ground, and the field of fire from the fire trenches is often worthless.

These particular trenches, however, were as cunningly sited as possible, and every possible use had been made of the ground for observation purposes. How the Italians ever succeeded in taking the place at the beginning of the war is a mystery. However, they did take it, and it was quite obvious that as long as they held it any Austrian advance into Italy *viâ* the Adige valley was an impossibility.

The *morale* of this Alpini battalion was excellent. One of our party asked one of the Italian officers if

he thought they were likely to be attacked on this sector.

"Per Bacco, no," answered the Italian with a smile, adding by way of explanation, "You see the Austrian intelligence department are very efficient, and of course they know *We* are holding this sector!"

We spent nearly two hours looking round, and were much interested in the cooking, heating, and general living arrangements. Some of the troops were billeted in double-lined huts and others in tunnels. They were beautifully warm, and there seemed to be no lack of fuel or rations. Practically all stores were brought up by "telefericas" or aerial cable railways. I asked if any lorries had ever made the ascent by the way we came, and was told that two had tried, but had gone over the edge; and, being told where to look, I could just see the mangled remains some 3000 or 4000 feet below us.

A curious incident occurred as we were walking round. The Colonel had been explaining that men occasionally were killed by falling over the edge, and that it was necessary to walk at all times with care. He had hardly said this when he trod on a loose stone, both his feet went from under him, and had it not been for the promptness with which one of his officers and an orderly seized his ankles, he would have in all probability gone over himself.

There was practically no artillery activity on this day. The Italian heavies were sending a few shells over into Rovereto, but there was no Austrian reply.

After most cordial farewells, accompanied by press-

ing invitations to come again, we left at 3 P.M., reached Ala at 4.30, where we had tea, and got back to Pozzoleone at 9.30 P.M.

During January the time was filled up with reconnaissances, inspections, and much football. On 2nd January the 144th Brigade was inspected by General Maistre, the French Commander-in-Chief. It was a really good turn-out, and the General expressed his pleasure and satisfaction in glowing terms. There were also many ceremonial visits to be paid. On most days we received a call from some Italian or French General and his staff, and, of course, all these visits had to be returned.

The fighting activity at the front seemed to have almost entirely died down, but the towns were much bothered at night by persistent bombing attacks made by a large and daring German squadron, which was attached to the Austrian Army opposite us.

Our particular area, having no towns, was not bothered, but Padova, Castelfranco, Treviso, and Istrana had a very bad time. The British G.H.Q. at Padova had some very narrow escapes, bombs dropping within a few feet of Sir Herbert Plumer's house on several occasions. In fact, the persistence of the attacks eventually caused the removal of G.H.Q. to a more remote spot.

On the 6th the French Artillery Commander was killed at Castelfranco.

The Division started to move into an area some thirty kilometres to the north-east on about 25th January, and, moving gradually by a somewhat circuitous route, was concentrated, by the beginning of February, in an area of which the centre was some

ten kilometres west of Treviso, with Divisional Headquarters at Levada. During our stay in this area nothing of particular interest took place, the time being filled up with a strenuous training and any amount of football. The weather began to improve, and, by the middle of the month, the sun at mid-day was really hot.

The Divisional theatre was opened at Paese, and two brigade cinematographs attracted large audiences. On the whole, the troops spent an enjoyable month, with the exception of the supply-column, who were billeted at Treviso, that place being our railhead. This was bombed nightly with the utmost severity. I doubt if any town in Europe has been so completely damaged by the sole action of hostile aircraft as Treviso. The place was a shambles. It was impossible to drive through any of the main streets, owing to the masses of fallen masonry, and even on foot it was extremely difficult to get through the middle of the town.

The civilians were, of course, all evacuated, but the British and Italian troops who had to remain in the place had a bad time, and there were a lot of casualties.

As the Division was now in reserve to the two divisions holding the Montello sector, frequent reconnaissances were made preparatory to the eventual taking over of the line.

On the 23rd February we received orders that we were to relieve the 41st Division in the left sector of the Montello area, and next day we went up there to arrange about the relief; but on arrival we found that they knew nothing about it,

and, after telephonic reference to G.H.Q., we discovered that a mistake had been made in the orders, and that we were destined instead to relieve the 7th Division in the right sector. The relief actually took place on the 27th, 28th, 1st, and the G.O.C. Division took over command of the sector at 10 A.M. on 2nd March, with Divisional Headquarters at Selva.

It is necessary, in order to give some idea of the sector we now held, to describe that peculiar feature of the Venetian plain known as the Montello. This is an oddly-shaped hog's back hill, some eight miles long and averaging three miles in breadth. It is a sort of excrescence on the uniform flat of the plain, and is probably of volcanic origin. The centre of the hill is a ridge, which is about 1000 feet above sea-level, and the slopes are steeper on the northern and eastern sides than on the southern and western. About twenty parallel roads, not more than 1000 yards apart, run right over the ridge from north to south; there is a lateral road, which runs along the top of the ridge, and another making a complete circuit of the base. The story is that originally the Montello was densely wooded with heavy trees, and that these were felled and used for the piles on which Venice was made. I cannot vouch for the truth of this, but it is a common local story, and is believed by the inhabitants.

The soil is of red sandstone, the roads are unmetalled, and consequently a comparatively small amount of rain renders them almost impassable. The terrain is fairly closely cultivated, with isolated farmhouses and cottages dotted about. There are

some spinneys and a good deal of undergrowth, but no large trees now.

To the north the hill is bounded by the river Piave, which emerges from the mountains at Pederobba, curls to the south at Jacor, and leaves the eastern end of the hill in a south-east direction at the ruined village of Nervesa, which was in the front line. The Piave here consists of a river-bed over half a mile wide, and, normally, the water flows through various channels from ten to thirty feet in width with a depth of four to six feet. The melting of snow in the mountains or heavy rain may, however, turn this collection of small streams into a huge turbulent river; hence it can be easily seen that any operations conducted with a view to crossing the river are attended by the gravest risks.

On the far side of the Piave the ground rises gently at first in wooded slopes sprinkled with villages, and then, at a distance of some three miles, more and more steeply to the mountains overlooking the whole of the Venetian Plain.

Such was the sector in which the Division found itself holding the front line again for the first time since leaving the Vimy Ridge.

The front fire trench ran roughly round the base of the hill, with posts pushed forward on to the bank of the Piave, while, at the eastern end, the first line consisted actually of reinforced concrete keeps in the ruins of Nervesa.

From the ridge the observation was magnificent, and, at first sight, the position appeared to be an almost impregnable one. Second thoughts, however, brought home the obvious weak points. Firstly,

the position was extremely exposed, and, owing to the long forward slope from the ridge towards the front line, all movement was bound to be observed. Secondly, although our observation was excellent, that of the enemy was far better, owing to his superior command of high ground. Thirdly, it was possible for the enemy to concentrate a large force of artillery in the wooded slopes opposite, and open a concentric bombardment from north-west, north, north-east, east, and south-east. Fourthly, a very little rain would soon make communications impossible, owing to the bad state of the roads. Fifthly, the Montello was obviously a key position, if ever there was one.

With it in his possession the enemy would have gained a strong footing on our side of the Piave, the last natural obstacle to the Venetian Plain, the whole line to the south would have been enfiladed, Venice would have gone, and it is difficult to see where the next stand could have been made.

As a matter of fact, the 48th Division were only in the sector for a fortnight, and, during that period, had the most quiet time imaginable. The total casualties of the Division during the fourteen days were less than thirty.

It is, however, of some interest to record the salient points of this sector, in view of the fact that, in their big attack in June, the Austrians made their greatest effort here, and actually succeeded in capturing over half the hill before they were ejected by desperate Italian counter-attacks, fortunately aided by the wet weather, which caused the Piave to come down in spate, thus rendering the communica-

tions of the invader so precarious that he was unable to keep up his supplies of munitions and food.

By 2nd March the Division had completely taken over the line, the 145th Brigade on the right, 143rd on the left, and 144th in reserve about Giavera.

Taking it all round, it was the most quiet and comfortable sector ever held by the Division during the war. Hostile artillery action was negligible, the weather above the average, observation splendid, and there was plenty of opportunity for recreation. The artillery had a view second to none, with pleasant quarters, and gun positions which were excellent in "peace" warfare of this kind.

It must not, however, be thought that the time was wasted. General Fanshawe quickly grasped the weak points of the position, and much hard work was done by all arms, especially the Divisional R.E.'s and Pioneers, in strengthening the line, improving and camouflaging roads, constructing strong points, and generally improving the sector. We had scarcely settled in when the news was confirmed, to the greatest regret of all ranks, that the C-in-C., Sir Herbert Plumer, was returning with his staff to France, and handing over command of the British force in Italy to Lord Cavan.

Sir Herbert, now Lord Plumer, was one of those commanders who had the rare and wonderful gift of inspiring confidence and devotion in the troops under his command. The fact of "Plum" having ordered an operation had the effect of making commanders, staffs, and rank and file realise that it

was worth carrying through at all costs. There may have been other equally brilliant commanders in this war, but I question there ever having been one more capable of getting the best out of the troops under him.

At the same time as the departure of the C.-in-C. and staff, the 41st Division left Italy for France, to be followed, at a short interval, by the 5th Division, and also the Headquarters of the XIth Corps. Thus the British contingent in Italy was reduced to a comparatively small force, consisting of three divisions with corps, departmental, and lines of communication troops.

This tour in the Montello sector calls for little of special interest. We had only been in the line a week when orders were received to the effect that we were to be relieved by the 58th Italian Division. There followed a very hectic week. Italian officers of all arms turned up at all times at our little headquarters at Selva to find out about the line. We required about twenty interpreters, and only had three.

Owing, I suppose, chiefly to the lack of interpreters and the want of knowledge of each other's methods, absurd and tiresome mistakes were frequent. We would, for instance, arrange that the battalion and company commanders of the right relieving brigade should come up to reconnoitre the line at 10 A.M. the following day. One would be woken up at about 6 A.M. to hear that several Italian officers had arrived, and after some parleying would find that they were the machine-gun officers of the

left brigade. Something had miscarried. It was quite useless to explain that we had made all arrangements for the battalion officers of the right brigade, and didn't expect any one for the left sector, least of all machine-gun officers. One simply had to make the best of a bad job. But owing to all these mistakes both regimental and staff officers had an enormous amount of extra work, and much valuable time was wasted. It was necessary to make full use of one's sense of humour to avoid a loss of temper, which would have been both futile and impolitic. However, after many vicissitudes, the relief was completed, and the G.O.C. handed over command to the G.O.C. 58th Italian Division at 10 A.M. on 16th March.

The Austrians speeded the departing guest by shelling Selva and Volpago on the evening of the 15th.

On relief the Division was concentrated once more in the Levada area, where we stayed for two days, and then moved on westwards to our old area round Piazzola. In this area we remained until 1st April, nothing of particular interest occurring. The whole Division was enthralled by the news of the great German offensive in France.

The formation of the 48th Machine-gun Battalion was commenced here under Major Long, 145th Machine-gun Company, and the battalion was soon taken over by Lieut.-Colonel R. J. Clarke, C.M.G., D.S.O., who commanded the battalion until demobilisation.

On the 26th March orders were received to move

west into an area in reserve for the middle sector of the Asiago Plateau front.

The 7th and 23rd Divisions started to go into this sector, and we commenced our move on 1st April, moving by Quinto and Vicenza to an area in the valley of the Agno, with headquarters at Trissino. The Division was billeted in the large villages of Montecchio Maggiore, Arzignano, Cornedo and Castel Gomberto, and the smaller hamlets in between these places. The valley is a wonderfully fertile one. It is bounded by foothills to the east and west, and is some fifteen miles in length. To the north two roads lead towards Schio, Thiene, and the mountains. To the south the valley opens out, and gradually emerges into the Venetian Plain. Trissino is a village built on a steep hill, and has the appearance of an island in the middle of this beautiful valley. We were destined to become well acquainted with this area, as practically the whole of our time, when not in the line, from April 1918 until demobilisation was spent here. On the completion of the move the Pioneer Battalion were at once ordered up to the mountains to assist in the making of a new road. Their headquarters were at Monte Cavaletto, some 3600 feet high, and they were attached to the 23rd Division. The time passed pleasantly enough for the rest of the Division. Frequent reconnaissances of the mountain area were made, but nothing of special interest occurred.

On the 9th April H.R.H. the Duke of Connaught inspected the 144th Brigade. The review went off well, although the salute was somewhat spoilt by

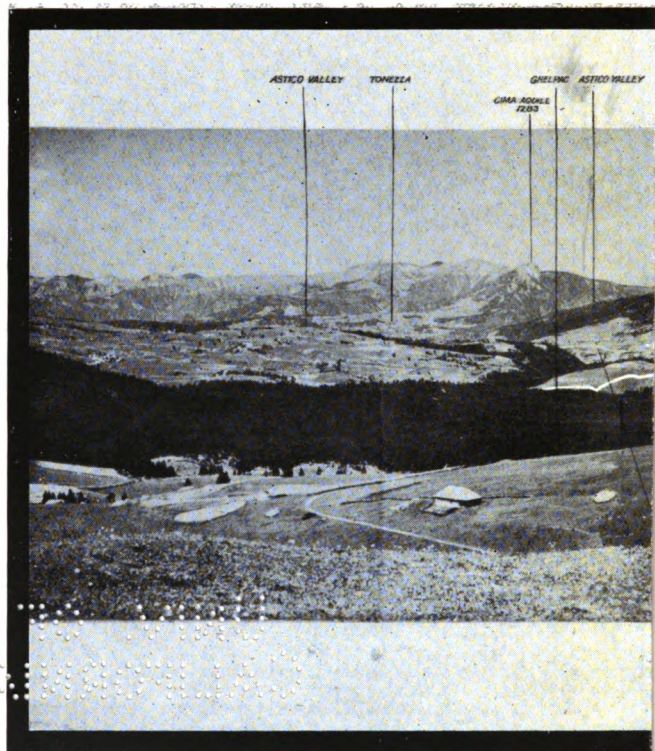
Italian airmen from the aerodrome at Castel Gomberto, who insisted on doing "stunts" about twenty feet above the heads of the troops. On the 16th we received orders to prepare to relieve the 23rd Division in the right sector of the line in about a week's time, and the necessary orders were issued.

CHAPTER III.

THE GRANEZZA SECTOR.

SOME description of the Asiago Plateau position is necessary for the reader to understand the sector taken over by the British forces. The Venetian Plain extends northwards to a line running roughly from east to west through Marostica, Breganze, Thiene, Schio. Just north of this line the ground rises abruptly to an average height of 4000 to 4500 feet. The Asiago Plateau is a sort of natural basin in the Alps, and is some seven miles in extent from east to west, and three miles from north to south.

The central point of the plateau is the town of Asiago (3000 feet), a well-known pre-war winter sports resort. The plateau is bounded on the south by pine-covered mountains of a depth of about 4000 yards to the point where the mountains slope steeply down to the plain. To the north lies a higher and deeper range of mountains guarding the Southern Trentino, and merging back gradually into the high Alps. At the western end the plateau narrows down to the gloomy ravine of the Val D'Assa, where the opposing front trenches are close to one another on each side of an impassable gorge some 2000 feet



deep. To the east the plateau again ends in the rugged heights on each side of the Brenta.

The plateau itself consists of undulating cultivated land freely sprinkled with villages, and perfectly adaptable for ordinary military operations.

The importance of the position may be judged when the point is grasped that this was the only part of the whole Italian mountain front where the operations of ordinary attack were possible. From the enemy point of view, the temptation to start an offensive in this sector must have been irresistible. The Austrians were well served by a first-class road running from north to south from their railheads at Levico and Caldonazzo; their positions dominated ours, and they had only to overrun our front line to a depth of 4000 yards to stand on the edge of the mountains overlooking the plain, with no further obstacle nearer than the Adige to a subsequent advance. A break-through of this kind would therefore have meant the turning of the whole of the eastern part of the Italian Front, and the retirement of the line from the Montello to the sea, a distance of some fifty miles at least. Even this would have been a military operation of the utmost difficulty, with a victorious enemy debouching from the mountains on the northern flank. The more one considers the strategical situation, the more relief one feels that the Austrians failed to push through to the edge of the plain during the months of November and December 1917, and before the new Italian Front had become thoroughly stabilised.

However, by the time British troops took over the sector snow had put all chances of an enemy

offensive out of court for the time being, and we knew that we had at least two months in which to strengthen our positions before an enemy offensive need be expected. Frequent reconnaissances and visits to the divisions in the line had prepared the majority of the officers and a fair proportion of the N.C.O.'s and men for the conditions to be expected in the mountains.

The nature of the terrain was, however, so totally different from anything we had previously experienced during the war that most of us felt a certain amount of anxiety as to the result, more especially those who were responsible for the supplying of the Division with food, munitions, and other necessities.

The first thing to be done was to get the Division equipped on a scale deemed necessary for the mountains. This entailed in the first place considerable additions to the first-line transport.

Some 400 extra mules and 200 pack-saddles were issued to us by G.H.Q., together with the call on 60 L.G.S. waggons and 120 more mules belonging to an auxiliary H.T. Coy. This extra transport was mostly divided among the fighting units in the most suitable proportion, and a part was kept in the hands of the O.C. Divisional train, to be used as a pool as and when it became necessary.

Certain extra stores were also issued, such as alpenstocks, sheepskin sleeping-bags, long gloves, and large quantities of empty petrol-tins for the supply of water.

The relief was carried out by one brigade at a time on successive days. From the Trissino area brigades moved by Malo to Sarcedo, thence to Mare

or Fara, at the bottom of the mountains, and on the third day up to Granezza on the plateau. The actual climb up the hill was a very severe one, being an ascent of about 4000 feet up narrow and precipitous mule-tracks. For calculating time and distances of movements up the mountains we learnt a valuable tip from the Italians, which was to allow one hour for every 300 metres of ascent, including halts. The men naturally went up light, their packs being taken up on the first-line transport or in Fiat lorries.

It was found that a platoon could reach the top in about five hours, and that very few men fell out at this pace. There was an excellent two-way lorry road up the mountains, but as during a relief this was fully required by artillery, transport, &c., infantry were forbidden to use it, and in any case the continual windings and twists made it so long that the ascent by the mule-tracks was easier and quicker. Field artillery, moving by the road, took about six hours to reach the top; Fiat lorries about two and a half hours.

The 143rd Brigade were the first to go up, taking over the right sector on the 21st April, followed by 144th Brigade, who took over the left sector on the 22nd, and 145th Brigade, who moved into reserve at Granezza on the 23rd. On this day also Divisional Headquarters and the majority of the artillery went in, Major-General Fanshawe assuming command of the sector at 12 noon.

The Divisional area was some 3000 yards wide and 4500 in depth. Starting from the south the reserve line ran roughly along the summit of Monte

Mazze, Cima del Porco, and Cima di Fonte, at a height of some 4500 feet. From this reserve line the ground tended to slope gradually down to the front line on the edge of the plateau, which was only about 3000 feet above sea-level. Immediately to the north of Monte Mazze lay the flat and open Granezza valley, through which ran the main road to Asiago. In this small valley were crowded Divisional Headquarters, the Reserve Infantry Brigade, a Field Company, the majority of the first-line transport of the Division, part of the D.A.C., and various other details, in addition to the reserve ammunition and ration dumps. Fortunately, it was mainly hidden from direct enemy observation by the wooded hills of Monte Torle and Kaber Laba to the north. It will, however, always remain a mystery why the Austrians did not shell it more than they did. A few odd shells arrived about every other day, but I believe it was never really bombarded except during the Austrian attack of 15th June. Here there was a football ground, an out-of-doors gymnasium, a wooden church hut, and even a wooden theatre, which showed us that the Italian troops previously holding the sector had realised the importance of making themselves as self-contained as possible. To the west of the valley the ground was densely wooded and very broken, movement to the front being limited to third-class mule-tracks over Monte Kaco and Monte Langabisa.

From Granezza the Asiago road ran northward again past Pria del Acqua to the front line.

For lateral communications there was an excellent road running from east to west along the reserve



RESERVE BATTALION HEADQUARTERS, KABERLABA.



THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF PRESENTING MEDALS TO THE DIVISION AT GRANEZZA.

line ; another some 1000 yards in the rear below the crest of the mountains ; and another branching off at Pria del Acqua, and leading to the division on our left, at a distance of about 1500 yards behind the front line.

The forward system of defence consisted of the front and support lines, the latter about 1000 yards in rear of the former, both ordinary single fire trenches, while switches, for containing the enemy in pockets should he break through the front line, ran from the front to the support line at Boscon, Kaber Laba, and Malga Fassa.

There was a marked absence of strong points, work on which had to be commenced immediately. The headquarters of the brigades in the line were at Pria del Acqua and Monte Torle ; but these were afterwards moved to the southern slopes of Kaber Laba, where they were less vulnerable to enemy shelling and better situated for observation.

The battery positions were mostly on the southern slopes of Kaber Laba and Monte Torle, with some of the heavies as far back as the reserve line.

Practically the whole of the Divisional area was densely covered with pine forests, with the exception of Granezza and a large clearing on the north-western slopes of Kaber Laba about 1000 yards in width.

The front-line trench was of the deep narrow type with a high firing-step. In places it was cut out of the solid rock. Starting from the right it ran at the foot of the San Sisto ridge for about 1000 yards just inside the edge of the pine woods.

The field of fire here was poor, owing to trees and

broken ground in front. The trench continued through the edge of the wood up to the Kaber Laba, clearing where it ran for 1000 yards or so through open plain, entering the woods again about 500 yards from the left of our sector. There were dug-outs at intervals, of poor construction and insufficient accommodation. No-Man's-Land was from 2000 to 1000 yards wide, and we held a light outpost line for observation purposes some 500 yards forward of the front trench.

On taking over the sector things were very peaceful. Within ten days all this was changed. Our guns began to make the enemy's positions on the plateau very uncomfortable, and these attentions attracted a certain amount of retaliation. Active patrolling of No-Man's-Land was undertaken each night, and the infantry soon contrived to make themselves masters of this excellent training-ground for patrol work.

We arrived at Granezza in sleet and snow, and found the whole area a sea of mud. Snow fell during the afternoon and night of the 23rd, and continued almost incessantly for four days. After this it turned to rain and fog, and it was not until the 30th that we had the first glimpse of sun.

The disappearance of the snow revealed a terrible state of affairs. The accumulated filth of three years lay on the ground, around and even under the huts. No refuse appeared to have been burnt or buried since the commencement of the war. The stench was horrible, and the medical authorities shook their heads and talked darkly of impending epidemics. How to get rid of it all was a difficult

problem, as, being on the rock, it was impossible to dig holes. However, all units set to work with a will, and by constructing numerous incinerators a great clearance was made, and the locality was gradually got into a more sanitary condition.

That no epidemic ever did occur was chiefly due to the fact that the plague of flies usually associated with the crowding together of large numbers of human beings was non-existent. Flies on the Asiago Plateau are comparatively rare, owing to the high altitude.

The accommodation for the troops was, on the whole, fair. Troops not actually in the line were in wooden huts, each hut holding the equivalent of a platoon. Some of these were in very bad repair and let in the snow and rain in places; but regimental pioneers, assisted by the R.E. and Pioneer Battalion, effected temporary repairs, and for the main part the men were warm and comfortable. The accommodation immediately in rear of the front line was poor, and consisted of tin or wooden shelters built into the sides of the ridges.

The most serious question was the almost complete absence of dugouts or any sort of cover in the event of heavy hostile shelling. Fortunately for us the Austrian artillery was inactive, and we suffered comparatively few casualties; but if we had had a pushing German artillery commander opposite us we should have had a very poor time indeed, and would probably have lost a great number of men.

A Rear Headquarters was established at the village of Fara, at the foot of the mountains. Here were located Rear Divisional Headquarters, consisting of part of the Administrative services, the

Mobile Veterinary Section, Headquarters of the Divisional train, D.A.D.O.S. store, &c. Either at Fara or in the neighbourhood was also that portion of first-line transport not required on the plateau. A small Officers' Club and Rest Camp for Other Ranks was also established, where parties going on leave or courses, or returning therefrom, could sleep for a night on their way from and to their units.

The various companies of the Divisional train, the R.A. waggon lines, and the D.A.C. were billeted in villages along the foot of the mountains in the most convenient localities available for drawing supplies from the Divisional Railhead at Villa Verla. The system of supplying the Division in this sector was a rather complicated one, and deserves detailed description.

Trench warfare in France for three years or more had made the average individual somewhat indifferent to the supply question. Commanders and regimental officers regarded the provision of the necessities of life as a matter of course, and the majority of them gave no thought of how the stuff arrived, at any rate as far as the brigade dumps. Certainly the actual supply of the front-line troops caused some anxiety to unit commanders in the front line, especially when there was a "strafe" on, or in a heavily-shelled and unduly exposed sector. But much practice and experience had made the solution of the problem so simple that if any hitch did occur the Quartermaster and the Transport Officer were cursed by all and sundry, and were simply told not to let it occur again.

For available supplies not to reach the neighbourhood of brigade dumps was almost unheard of.

We were now, however, in a sector which required a very careful organisation and distribution of available transport resources to get munitions and food, even to the neighbourhood of the fighting troops.

The railhead was at Villa Verla, some six kilometres from the foot of the mountains. Rations were drawn here by the companies of the train, and taken direct to the rear headquarters of units on the plateau which were situated at Fara or in the neighbourhood. The heavy draught-horses of the train were not suitable for working up the mountain, neither could they be kept on the plateau, as the lack of grazing, water, and space, in addition to the cold, soon had a serious effect on their condition, and rendered them useless for work. From the base to the top of the mountains therefore, everything had to be transported without the help of the train horses.

The alternative methods of getting stuff up to the plateau were as follows: (a) By telefericas or aerial cable railways. There were two of these aerial lines supplying the Granezza sector.

The system of a teleferica is an endless steel cable supported by upright girders every 200 or 300 yards, carrying at intervals of about 100 feet small flat trucks suspended from the wire, each one capable of taking a weight of some 400 lb.

The endless cable is worked by electric power from the terminal station at the bottom of the mountains.

There were two intermediate stations on the way up, and at each of these large fatigue-parties had to be permanently employed for transferring the loads

from one truck to another. Similarly, large loading and unloading parties were required at each terminal station. It was found in practice that it was not economical to send up rations by this means. In the first place, it was difficult to load them securely on the little flat platforms, and they were likely to fall off. In the second place, a tremendous amount of pilfering went on on the way up. The lower slopes of the mountains were fairly thickly populated, and in many places the cable passed only a few feet above the roofs of cottages and trees, and it was quite possible with the aid of a long stick with a hook attachment to pull stuff off the cars as they passed. Thirdly, the motive power used to break down fairly often, and the delivery of stores at the top was not particularly reliable. Fourthly, G.H.Q. could only give us a comparatively small allotment of transport facilities, as the telefericas were required almost wholly for ammunition for the heavy guns.

(b) By Fiat lorries. This was much the quickest, most economical, and certain method, and was used exclusively by the Italians when holding the sector. That it could not be adopted by us was due to the fact that not sufficient lorries were available; that the British force was suffering from a serious shortage of petrol, owing largely to the accidental burning of practically the whole of the reserve dump on the line of communication about this time; and that if it had been adopted our large animal transport establishments would have been, in the main, wasted.

(c) By horse and mule transport. Owing to the

objections to (a) and (b) described above, this method was considered the most economical, and was adopted.

We were allotted a large number of extra mules, limbered waggons, and pack-saddles, and had to organise the most efficient service we could. For the actual transporting of stores up the mountains, pack-work was condemned. A mule could take up about 200 lb., four mules in an L.G.S. waggon could take 1600 lb. The ordinary train G.S. waggon could take up about 2000 lb. with six mules. From the above it will be seen that the particular form of transport to concentrate on was L.G.S. waggons drawn by mules.

In practice it was soon found that though animals could make the journey to the top and back in a day, they could not go on doing it without a rest every third day. It meant at least ten hours on the road. Also it became apparent that even the adaptable mule could not stand being kept alternate days in the plains and on the plateau.

It was obvious therefore that the best solution was to divide the transport, and arrange a meeting-place half-way up.

The first-line transport of units was therefore increased by sufficient mules and L.G.S. waggons to provide for this system, and was divided into two echelons, A and B.

Taking an infantry battalion as an example, an extra twenty mules and three L.G.S. waggons were allotted, making it up in all to forty-six mules or light draught-horses and ten L.G.S. waggons.

The mules were provided from the extra allot-

ment to the Division by G.H.Q. ; the L.G.S. waggons were borrowed from the D.A.C.

The two echelons were equally divided, Echelon A being kept on the plateau, and Echelon B on the plains at Fara or near by. A meeting-place was fixed at Schiessere, a small village about half-way up, which gave facilities for outspanning, grazing, and feeding, and, later on, for watering.

Every day Echelon B would start from Fara at a time fixed so as to ensure them arriving at Schiessere at a certain hour. The ascent took about three hours. Echelon A was timed to leave the plateau at a time which would ensure it arriving at Schiessere half an hour before Echelon B of the corresponding unit arrived. This enabled the Echelon A animals to be taken out, watered, and fed before Echelon B arrived, and they could then hitch straight into the loaded waggons and move off without delay. Echelon B animals, of course, had half an hour's rest, a drink, and a feed, and then returned to Fara at leisure with the empty waggons.

The Schiessere meeting-place was of small dimensions, not more than two or three acres, and it was therefore necessary to ensure that not more than a limited number of the animals of either echelon was there at the same time. Five groups were therefore formed, consisting of the three infantry brigades, R.A., and all other units. The Echelons A and B of these five groups started at half-hour intervals, and a time-table was issued every week showing the exact hour at which each was to start.

In practice it was found best to start the earliest

Echelon B at 3 A.M. and the latest Echelon A at 5.30. Even this arrangement meant that the last Echelon A was not back on the plateau until after midday, and there was none too much time for Quartermasters to cut up and distribute the rations before the evening journey from the transport lines to the unit had to commence. Fortunately the majority of units in the area could be reached by wheeled transport unobserved.

The front and support battalions of the left sector, however, and some of the batteries, could only be reached by pack-animals after dark, and, as water had to be carried to them in addition, it can be imagined that the transport personnel of these units had an extremely hard time. During the first few days, until the animals got accustomed to the height, there were several bad accidents. One transport officer was killed owing to his horse shying over the edge of a cliff, and two or three limbers went over on different occasions.

Water was supplied to the plateau by a pipe-line carried up the mountains from the river Astico. There were various reservoirs, tanks, and stand-pipes in the Divisional area, and the supply was usually adequate. Owing, however, to the danger of the pipe-line being cut by shell-fire, it was necessary to husband resources, and we were supposed to be on a ration of a gallon a day per man. Two or three small ponds also existed at which animals could be watered, though these ran dry later in the summer, and the pipe-line became the sole source of supply.

I don't think any one enjoyed the first week of

this tour. The weather was atrocious, men in the front line were wet through continuously, and there was no sun to dry their clothes. To those not accustomed to it, living in a perpetual cloud is a most depressing experience, and every one heaved a sigh of relief when at last the sun managed to struggle through on the 30th. After this the weather improved very gradually, and one was able to look about and get some grasp of the salient points of of the sector as a whole, which had been almost impossible in the fog and snow.

In many ways the position was naturally admirable for defensive purposes. Firstly, observation was perfect. From the reserve line at Cima di Fonte, from Cima del Porco, and from the northern slopes of Kaber Laba, one obtained a magnificent view of the whole of No-Man's-Land, the Austrian front and support lines, and the approaches thereto. One could see every ruined house and wall in the villages of Asiago, Canove, and Campo Rovere, through which the Austrian supplies had to come to their front-line troops. Farther away were the wooded slopes of the main Austrian positions, including the heights of Gallio, Zebio, Interotto, Verena, and Erio; and one had a glimpse of the deep gorge of the Val D'Assa, along which ran the enemy's main line of communication through the mountains from the Trentino to the front. The best of our observation positions was the northern slope of Kaber Laba, along which ran the support line, reached by a tunnel through the mountain. This place became so popular with G.H.Q. staff officers, commanders of other

sectors, distinguished visitors from other theatres of war, and the usual crowd of sight-seers and curiosity-mongers, that it was aptly named "The Dress Circle."

With all this perfect observation it appeared almost impossible for the enemy to attempt an attack by day if the visibility was even fair, unless he could cover it with such an overwhelming bombardment as to completely smother the artillery, machine-gun, and rifle fire of the defence.

Secondly, our communications both laterally and from front to rear were good, as explained before, and all dispositions, movement, reinforcing, &c., were screened from the enemy by the thick pine-woods with the exception of the forward zone of the left brigade.

Thirdly, there was no particular danger about the flanks. The French on our right had a position even stronger and more commanding than our own. On the left we joined up with the 7th British Division, and there was a main road leading almost up to the point of junction by which reinforcements could be quickly and secretly moved up.

Fourthly, the trenches being for the most part cut out of the solid rock, were not likely to be blown to pieces as easily as those dug out of earth.

In spite, however, of these advantages there were some glaring weaknesses to counterbalance them.

Firstly, and most important of all, was the lack of depth. 4000 yards from the front fire-trench to the

last reserve line is dangerously inadequate, and it must be remembered that if the enemy once reached the reserve line the whole of the Venetian Plain was at his feet.

Secondly, the field of fire on the right of the sector was very poor, owing to the thick woods in No-Man's-Land. This could have been improved by tree-felling, but would have been of doubtful advantage, as our positions would have been made more visible and vulnerable.

Thirdly, although our communications were good, they could be rendered almost unusable by very heavy shelling, which would have the effect of knocking down trees across the various roads and tracks.

Fourthly, the complete absence of shell-proof cover.

Fifthly, the absence of strong-points to be used as rallying-places in case of a penetration of either of the trench-lines.

Sixthly, the fact that nearly all signal communications were above ground; it was not possible to dig trenches for buried cable owing to the rock.

It will be seen therefore that much work was necessary in order to nullify as many of these weaknesses as possible. Work was commenced at once by all units on strong-points, switches, construction of O.P.'s, dugouts, alternative tracks, and the betterment of signal communication. Fighting activity was confined at first to registration and pre-arranged "shoots" on certain localities by the artillery, and active offensive patrolling of No-

Man's-Land by the infantry. A few prisoners were taken, but the enemy showed little enterprise between the lines, and our infantry established command of the neutral ground without much difficulty. On 29th April the 6th Royal Warwicks attempted a raid, which, however, was not successful. The raiding companies were met by a very heavy barrage when moving forward over No-Man's-Land; and though some of the objectives were reached, only one prisoner was taken, and our casualties were heavy, amounting to over fifty. From the way in which the enemy barrage was put down and the absence of Austrians in the objectives reached, there was little doubt but that somehow the enemy had got wind of our intentions, and were prepared accordingly.

The time passed without particular incident after this raid until 9th May, when orders were received that we were to side-slip to the left into the area held by the 7th Division, at the same time being relieved ourselves by the 23rd Division. A triangular relief is always complicated, and we spent a lot of time reconnoitring the 7th Division area and making detailed arrangements for the move. On the 15th, however, orders were all changed again. We were to be relieved by the 23rd Division and go back to reserve in the Trissino area, with the exception of the 144th Infantry Brigade, which was to be attached to the 7th Division, and to take over the whole of their front. These moves were preparatory to an offensive to be undertaken by the British and French forces early in June, with a view to making

good the whole of No-Man's-Land, and obtaining a footing on the mountains beyond the plateau. That this offensive did not take place was due to the events described hereafter. On 17th May the 144th Brigade moved off to the left to take over the 7th Division front, and two days later we were relieved by the 23rd Division at Granezza, and returned to the Trissino area.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CARRIOLA SECTOR.

WE found an extraordinary difference in the climate on our return to the reserve area. The Italian summer had come on with wonderful rapidity, and after the bad weather and cold winds of the plateau the descent to the plains was like going into a bake-house. The sun during the day was now unpleasantly powerful, and it was foolish to try any strenuous exercise between the hours of 10 A.M. and 5 P.M. The troops marched back to the Trissino area by night, and were all concentrated by the 22nd. Immediate steps were taken to put the men into summer clothing—*i.e.*, drill tunics, shorts, and Egyptian helmets. Training for the forthcoming offensive was commenced at once, and there was much cleaning up and reorganisation to be done. The transport in particular wanted a lot of attention, many of the animals having got into a bad way during our month in the mountains.

For this purpose no better place could be imagined than the luxuriant Trissino Valley. In a very few days the Division began to look spick and span, and the animals rapidly put on flesh.

The Divisional Theatre at Arzignano drew large

audiences nightly, while regimental sports and cricket matches took place in the early evenings.

At this time the Division suffered very badly from a curious sort of fever, which laid out whole units simultaneously. Certain regiments started this peculiar disease in the mountains, and in consequence it was given the name of "Mountain Fever," but we found that it was just as prevalent in the plains, and I believe that the eventual diagnosis of the medical authorities was that it was a species of the ordinary influenza. The symptoms were a violent headache and very high temperature for three or four days, followed by extreme weakness and prostration. When a unit was attacked the men went down in droves, and I recollect one battery at this time which had such a severe visitation that at one moment only one officer, two N.C.O.'s, and five men remained at duty.

Barring this influenza wave, every one enjoyed the fortnight in reserve. The training was mostly done in the early morning, and the men rested till tea-time, after which there was further training or games.

On the 26th orders were received to relieve the 7th Division on the 29th to 31st, and the necessary arrangements and reconnaissances were accordingly made. The leading Brigade (143rd) moved off on the 29th, and on the 31st May General Fanshawe took over command of the Carriola sector at 12 noon from the 7th Division.

This sector was about 4000 yards in width. On the right we, of course, joined up with the 23rd British Division in the Granezza area, and on our

left was the 20th Italian Division. On the whole, the sector was rougher and more difficult than the Granezza one. The front fire-trench ran through thick woods from our right boundary for about 1500 yards, after which it emerged into treeless but very broken country, and followed the south side of the Ghelpac ravine to the extreme left, the last 1000 yards being again in woods. The Ghelpac ran southwards across No-Man's-Land from Canove towards our front line at Pelly Cross, whence it turned due west and joined up with the Val D'Assa just beyond our left boundary. From a negligible brook for the first 2000 yards, the Ghelpac water-course changes into a precipitous gorge abruptly, and for the left 1000 yards of our position presented an almost impassable obstacle immediately in front of our foremost trench. No-Man's-Land was nearly 2000 yards in depth on our right, and only about 100 yards on the left, where the opposing trenches were only divided by the aforesaid Ghelpac ravine. Two important eminences, Hill 1002 and Cunico, dominated the whole of No-Man's-Land in the right half of our sector. These were held by us with outposts by day and night, but owing to their isolated position and the difficulty of reinforcing, it was not considered practicable to hang on to them in the case of a heavy attack.

Behind the front line, at approximately 1000 yards, ran a series of badly-dug and incompleated support trenches, connected at intervals with the front line by switches, designed to "pocket" the enemy should he penetrate the front.

The most important of these switches were the

Lemerle Switch, running from our right front boundary back to the north-west of Mte. Lemerle ; and the Cesuna Switch, which ran from a point in the front line about 1000 yards from our left boundary to the base of Mte. Lemerle. These two switches were nothing like completed, but they were of the greatest value in the subsequent fighting, as will be seen from the account of the action of 15th June. Guarded by the Cesuna Switch, some 1200 yards in rear of the front line, and 200 feet above it, lay the ruined village of Cesuna, a target for much hostile shelling and a most unpopular locality for troops and working parties. To the south-east of Cesuna was the steeply-wooded Mte. Lemerle, some 1000 feet above the front line, on the southern slopes of which were the headquarters of the right infantry brigade and right artillery brigade. The left brigade of infantry and artillery had their headquarters on the unnamed hill 1000 yards south-west of Cesuna. Behind these hills, and another 500 feet higher, were the heights of Magnaboschi, Zovetto, and Brusibollo, mostly surrounded with bits of unfinished and disconnected trench. Behind these again were further heights, culminating in Cima di Fonte, Brusabo, and Mte. Pau, along which ran the G.H.Q. or reserve line. All these heights were steeper and more abrupt than in the Granezza sector, and divided by more precipitous valleys.

Communications from the rear to the front of the area were furnished by two good roads, one running from the reserve line at Mte. Pau past Divisional Headquarters at Carriola and Handley Cross to the front line close to our right boundary ; the other,

also from Mte. Pau, through Campiello and Caprari to the front line 1000 yards north of Cesuna. Laterally a road ran from Pelly Cross actually into No-Man's-Land for a short distance, and then bent southwards to the village of Cesuna and on to our left boundary at Fondi. Behind this, at an average distance of 2000 yards, a road coming from the right division ran past Handley Cross to Magnaboschi, and thence to Campiello. There were numerous mule-tracks leading in all directions, and a roughly-metalled road running from Magnaboschi forward to Cesuna, which was to prove of importance in the forthcoming fight. Communications with the plains were wretched and far more difficult than in the Granezza sector. The only road to the plateau ran from Caltrano through the area of the division on our left with at least fourteen hairpin turns and some very steep gradients to Campiello, where it branched into two forks, the one leading forward to Fondi and Cesuna, the other back to Mte. Pau and Carriola. Two telefericas served the sector, one from Caltrano to Mte. Pau, the other from S. Dona to Casa di Foraoro.

We also had the use of a mountain railway, which ran on the rack-and-pinion system from Rochette on the plains to Campiello station, situated in a narrow and deep valley 2500 yards in rear of the front line.

The system of supplies from the plains was an extremely complicated one. The daily rations, ordnance stores, &c., were brought from Thiene in an ordinary pack-train to Chiuppano. Here they were transferred to trucks on a broad-gauge railway

which ran to Rocchette. At this latter place they were again transferred to the rack-and-pinion railway, which took them up to the plateau at Campiello station. On the plateau in various camps were kept the Echelon A transport of units, which repaired daily to Campiello and took rations, &c., from there direct to their units.

This system sounds all right on paper, but in practice it was a thoroughly bad one, and likely to break down at any moment. The first trouble was that Campiello, Rocchette, and the first half-mile of the rack-and-pinion railway were under direct observation of the enemy, who held the heights at the head of the Astico Valley, some four miles to the north-west of Rocchette. Consequently Rocchette was shelled pretty vigorously, and even Chiuppano received a certain amount of attention. That the latter place was not rendered impossible was solely due to want of enterprise on the part of the Austrians.

The rack-and-pinion railway crossed many deep ravines, and a direct hit on any of the vulnerable points would put it out of action for several days. Owing to the above-mentioned observation, all movement of supplies beyond Chiuppano had to be carried out after dark.

Secondly, Campiello station itself was an absolute death-trap. It was situated in a steep narrow valley, not more than one-third of a mile wide, running north and south, and in easy artillery range of the bulk of the enemy battery positions. Fortunately it was not under direct observation, but the Austrian gunners had only to pitch a shell into the valley to be almost sure of hitting something, and

to have a very good chance of doing some really vital damage.

The delivery from Campiello to units by first-line transport was fairly simple, provided that no artillery activity was going on. But the two forward roads were carefully registered by the enemy, and it was easy for him to make them extremely unpleasant and even unusable for transport when he wished. For the right forward sector every wheeled vehicle had to pass the cross-roads named Handley Cross some 1500 yards north of Divisional Headquarters, and 2000 yards behind the front line. At these cross-roads we found to our horror, on taking over the sector, was established the Divisional Artillery Dump. Thousands of 18-pr., 4.5, and heavier shells were stacked within 100 yards of this vital point.

It is not necessary here to point out the folly of making a large dump of high explosives at an important cross-roads 2000 yards in rear of the front-line trenches. So much urgent work was necessary on taking over the sector that lack of time and labour precluded any attempt to shift the dump. But when the attack came we paid heavily for the want of foresight which had allowed such a grave mistake to have been made.

The advantages and disadvantages of the sector as a defensive position were roughly the same as those of the Granezza sector. On the asset side we had the benefit of a left flank which was absolutely unturnable, as the depth of the Ghelpac ravine rendered impossible an enemy advance against the division on our left. On the debit side must be

placed poorer observation, worse communication with the plains, and the unfortunate situation of the front-line trench. This latter was a real danger. It is not suggested that the front line could have been located in any other place than it was. But following as it did the south side of the Ghelpac, it twisted and turned in such an exaggerated zig-zag that many of the front-line posts were completely isolated from view or covering fire from the adjacent ones on the right and left. Consequently in the case of even one of these posts being knocked out or rushed there was the possibility of a penetration being effected and the posts on the right and left being taken in rear. To make matters worse the very weakest part of the front line was at the junction of the two forward brigades. The remedy, of course, was a series of strong-points immediately in rear. These, however, had not been constructed, and although they were sited and commenced as soon as we took over the sector, it was quite impossible to make any real progress with them in the time available.

As in the Granezza area, there was the same absence of dugouts and the same lack of completion of the various defensive systems. On taking over, we were ordered to carry on preparations which had been already commenced for an offensive with limited objectives, which was to be carried out by the Italian VIth Army, of which the British corps formed part. The purpose of this projected offensive has always been somewhat obscure to me. The objectives were limited to include the whole of the plateau, and if they had been

taken our front line would have run along the base of the mountains opposite, with the Austrians sitting 2000 feet above it and commanding all routes across the plateau. The position would have been untenable for a day, and it is inconceivable that the "plan" was meant seriously. More probably the Comando Supremo wished to create a sufficient diversion to put out of joint the Austrian preparations for their great attack which was shortly expected, and also to test the fighting power and *morale* of the very mixed units of which the enemy Altopiano army was now composed. However, it was not our job to question the wisdom or otherwise of the operation. What we had to do was to get ready for it, and this entailed much hard work and the utilisation of all available labour for preparatory measures.

Existing dumps had to be largely increased, new forward dump in No-Man's-Land made, water storage arranged. Communications needed much improvement, and in particular work was carried on at high pressure on the completion of a new forward road running from Mte. Serona to Carriola. Forward tracks had to be taped out; special stores for the offensive obtained and issued to troops; extra camouflage had to be put up; and several practice field-days in moving to the assembly positions had to be held. There were numerous other small preparations to be made, the necessary adjuncts to any offensive; and in consequence of all this it may be imagined that there was practically no time to spare work for the strengthening of the weak points of the position from a defensive point

of view. To add to the difficulties of getting everything necessary done at once, the influenza epidemic was raging worse than ever, and during our first fortnight at Carriola something like 30 per cent of the Division was *hors de combat*. In spite of all these difficulties, the General kept in mind the weakness of the position, and allotted what time he could to the tasks of strengthening the most dangerous points. The defence scheme was worked out afresh, and practice given to troops in support and reserve in moving to their appointed places, and counter-attacking in case of an enemy offensive. As an almost uncanny premonition of impending events on the part of our Divisional Commander, I must quote one scheme in which the 7th Royal Warwicks had to move forward in artillery formation from Magnaboschi to reinforce the Cesuna Switch, and counter-attack from there in case of an enemy penetration of the front about Perghele. This particular exercise was repeated on two different days, and on the day of the attack of 15th June the battalion had to carry out the identical manoeuvre it had practised twice, which it did with a minimum of casualties and a maximum of success. In commenting on this afterwards, Knox,¹ who was one of the most experienced battalion commanders of the war, attributed his success almost entirely to the previous practice the battalion had had over the same ground.

The time passed quickly enough with all this amount of work. On the day of taking over, a concentrated artillery bombardment had been arranged

¹ Lieut.-Colonel J. M. Knox, D.S.O.

on certain of the enemy's "tender spots," with a view of getting him to reply and disclose some of his artillery positions. He did retaliate, after a good deal of provocation, by a heavy shelling of Cesuna, but visibility was not of the best, and his reply was so short that it is doubtful if many battery positions were spotted. Thereafter his artillery inactivity was extraordinary. Day after day hardly a shell came into our sector. This was good inasmuch as there was no hindrance to our preparations, but it obviously portended something. As usual, the optimists said that the enemy was short of ammunition; others declared that he was either saving up for our attack or was deliberately concealing his positions prior to his own offensive. This last assumption was the correct one. The weather had now improved, and was on the whole a pleasant change after the sultry heat in the reserve area. There was, however, a good deal of rain and mist, and quite a lot of thunder. On 4th June the weather suddenly turned bitterly cold again, and in the evening of the 5th snow began to fall. It lay about six inches deep at Carriola, and froze hard on the top. Some apprehensions were felt as to the condition of the troops in the line, who were not equipped properly for these arctic conditions, so at 5 A.M. on the 6th I started from Carriola heavily wrapped up in full winter kit, including a woolly waistcoat, muffler, and fur coat, to see how they were doing. The sun came up as I reached Fondi cross-roads, and here I shed my coat and muffler. By the time I reached the front-line trench I was sweating and took off

the "woolly." To the first man I met I put the question: "Did you have a very bad night last night." "Oh no, sir," was the answer. "Very comfortable, thank you." "How did you manage in the snow?" "There was no snow here, sir." A little farther on all the men encountered were in their shirt-sleeves, and obviously looked on any one carrying a "woolly" as a lunatic. On getting back to Carriola I found the snow was still visible though melting fast, and it was much warmer. I quote the above in order to show the extraordinary difference in conditions between the main part of the sector and the front line, which was at 1000 feet lower altitude. Needless to say, during the fortnight we were in the area preceding the attack, the front-line infantry made the most of their time in the frequent patrolling of No-Man's-Land, of which they quickly obtained complete command. On the 9th the influenza fiend attacked Divisional Headquarters, and laid us all out like nine-pins. On the 11th only the General and one A.D.C. were out of bed, and it was a somewhat debilitated collection of officers who attended the General's conference, called at short notice on the afternoon of the 14th. Brigade and unit commanders were present, and the General informed us that for the moment the offensive must be called off, as information, which could be considered as absolutely reliable, had been received by the Comando Supremo to the effect that an Austrian attack on a huge scale was to be launched on the following morning from the Altopiano to the sea, a front of some ninety kilometres in extent. The informa-

tion went so far as to give the western boundary of the attack, which included the French corps, but missed the two British divisions in the line. After explaining the situation, the General said: "If this information is correct, we shall probably not have an infantry attack on our front, but we are pretty certain to get our share of the preliminary bombardment. The safest thing to do is to hope for the best and prepare for the worst." He then went at great length into various points connected with the defence scheme, laying particular stress on the functions of the troops for counter-attack, the time for the withdrawal of the outpost line, and the rôle of the artillery as to firing on S.O.S. lines and counter-battery work. When the conference broke up I don't think that most of those present thought in their heart of hearts that an attack was likely. We had had so many rumours and warnings of this kind which had come to nothing that most of us had begun to disbelieve in them. However, the General had given his preliminary orders, and every one hastened to carry them out. As a matter of fact, the information sent out by the Comando Supremo turned out to be correct in every particular, with the exception of the point of the western flank of the attack, which included the British corps instead of excluding it. Bearing in mind the warnings received, we lay down for the night fully dressed.

CHAPTER V.

THE GREAT AUSTRIAN OFFENSIVE.

I WAS woken up on 15th June by some one tramping along the corridor of our hut and asking for the Intelligence Officer. Shouting out that he was in the next hut, I looked at my watch and saw it was 2.58 A.M. I was just going to sleep again when I heard a most extraordinarily weird and impressive noise, apparently coming nearer and nearer. I can only compare it to the sound of a heavy sea breaking on a rocky coast, intensely magnified, a quite continuous roar, not very loud but very insistent, and giving the impression of some tremendous force let loose. For a few seconds I wondered idly whether the noise really was the much-advertised attack, but any doubts were dispelled almost immediately by the sound of the swish-swish of gas-shells overhead, followed shortly by the whine and bang of H.E. shells arriving. It did not take many moments to get outside and into our offices. It was just beginning to get light, and it was quite evident that a very heavy bombardment was in progress. One could hear and see shells bursting all over the Carriola valley, and on the slopes of Mte. Pau and Mte. Serona behind us. Our little camp was com-

paratively immune, though 8-inch and 5.9's were dropping with frequent regularity about 200 yards from us just on the other side of the road. There seemed to be a fair proportion of gas-shells, so we put on our masks. As day broke the weather turned out to be dull and showery, with an extremely dense fog in places. In a very short time practically all wires forward of Divisional Headquarters were cut by shelling, and thereafter communication was only kept up by wireless, runners, and visual, the latter being much hampered by the fog. Before proceeding with a narrative of the fight, it will be as well to give the dispositions of the Division. At the commencement of the attack the Division was, as usual, on a two-brigade front—145th Brigade on the right, 143rd Brigade on the left, 144th Brigade, Divisional R.E. Pioneer Battalion, and 48th Machine-gun Battalion (less two companies) in Divisional Reserve. The 145th Brigade (Lieut.-Colonel Reynolds, 1st Bucks, in temporary command) had two battalions holding the front line each on a two-company front—i.e., the 1/4 Oxfords on the right, the 1/5 Gloucesters on the left, the 1st Bucks Battalion at Lemerle, and the 1/4 Royal Berks at Carriola. The 143rd Infantry Brigade (Brig.-General Sladen) had the 1/5 Royal Warwicks holding the front line, with its headquarters under some rocks north-west of Perghele House, and close behind the junction of the two front companies. The 1/8 Royal Warwicks had one company holding the Cesuna Switch, with the remainder of the battalion at Brusibollo Camp. The 1/6 Royal Warwicks were in Brigade Reserve at Mte. Pau, and the 1/7 Royal Warwicks were in

Divisional Reserve at Magnaboschi. The 143rd Trench Mortar Battery had five guns in the line and three in reserve at the headquarters 5th Royal Warwicks. The 144th Infantry Brigade (Lieut.-Colonel Tomkinson in temporary command) had—Brigade Headquarters—Carriola ; 1/6 Gloucesters—Mte. Serona ; 1/8 Worcesters—Mte. Brusabo ; 1/4 Gloucesters—Camisano (in the plains) ; 1/7 Worcesters—S. Dona (in the plains).

Of the 48th Machine-gun Battalion, D Company was attached to the 145th Brigade, and B Company to the 143rd Brigade. The remainder of the battalion was in Divisional Reserve. The artillery at the disposal of the Divisional commander consisted of the Divisional artillery (240th and 241st R.F.A. Brigades and Divisional Trench Mortar Battery), with the addition of the 35th R.F.A. Brigade. Infantry battalions were very weak, and it may be of interest to record their maximum fighting strengths on this day, which were as follows :—

1/5 Royal Warwicks (Major E. A. M. Blindloss)	. . .	436
1/6 Royal Warwicks (Lieut.-Colonel Pryor)	. . .	379
1/7 Royal Warwicks (Lieut.-Colonel J. M. Knox)	. . .	380
1/8 Royal Warwicks (Major P. H. Whitehouse)	. . .	450
1/5 Gloucesters (Major N. H. Waller)	. . .	466
1/4 Oxford & Bucks (Lieut.-Colonel A. J. N. Bartlett)	. . .	552
1/4 Royal Berks (Lieut.-Colonel A. B. Lloyd Baker)	. . .	497
1st Bucks (Major P. A. Hall)	. . .	566
1/4 Gloucesters (Major E. Shellard)	. . .	466
1/6 Gloucesters (Lieut.-Colonel H. Schomberg)	. . .	538
1/7 Worcesters (Major J. P. Bate)	. . .	548
1/8 Worcesters (Lieut.-Colonel H. T. Clarke)	. . .	617

These strengths were still further reduced by men still with their units affected by influenza, which was raging in the Division.

As previously stated, forward communications were quickly cut, but not before a message had been got through to both forward brigades to withdraw the outposts by 5 A.M. Both brigades reported intense shelling on their front but no signs of an infantry attack, but at 5.30 A.M. a message was received from G.H.Q. to the effect that deserters reported that an infantry attack would be launched at 6 A.M. No news of an infantry attack was received at Divisional Headquarters until just after 8 A.M., when three reports came in quick succession from O.P.'s reporting heavy machine-gun and rifle fire about Traverso, Buco di Cesuna, and Pelly Cross. Apparently the enemy infantry came in contact with our front-line infantry shortly before 7 A.M. They were held up in hand-to-hand fighting for a considerable time, but eventually by weight of numbers they effected the breach of our front line at two points—viz., our extreme right, where the 1/4 Oxford's joined the left battalion of the 23rd Division, and at the junction of the 1/5 Royal Warwicks and 1/5 Gloucesters just east of Perghele. Using the infiltration methods adopted with such success by the Germans in their March and April advances in France, the Austrians poured through the gaps made, and endeavoured to widen the breaches by working up machine-guns and turning the flanks of the troops on each side of the gaps.

At the eastern breach they had comparatively little success. The Oxford's put up a magnificent fight, and though for a time both their flanks were turned, they established a semicircular line of defence on the ridge just in front of their Battalion Head-

quarters, and held this position throughout the whole attack.

Headquarters cooks, orderly-room clerks, and batmen fought side by side with the survivors of the front-line companies, and many successful local counter-attacks were organised and carried through successfully to ease the situation. From prisoners afterwards identified, it was established beyond doubt that no less than seven Austrian battalions took part in the attack on this one unit, and paid very heavily in their unsuccessful attempts to dislodge it.

The breach effected at Perghele was much more serious. As stated in the preceding chapter, the weakest part of the Divisional front was the junction of the two brigades, owing partly to the dead ground in front afforded by the dense woods and the steep ravine of the Ghelpac, and partly to the fact that the front-line posts were none too well sited, and some of them were unable to see the posts on their right and left. What actually happened at the point of break-through is somewhat of a matter of conjecture, as the troops holding the front line at this point were practically all either killed or missing; but from inspection of the line after it was retaken by the Division on the 16th, the probable course of events could be traced. One or possibly two posts close to the junction were destroyed, together with the whole of their garrisons, during the preliminary bombardment and barrage by direct hits from heavy shells. The attackers, taking advantage of this, filtered in, and immediately turning outwards were able to take the next

posts in flank and even reverse. From the amount of empty cartridge-cases lying about, and the number of dead Austrians found, there was abundant evidence of these posts having put up a fine fight until they were overwhelmed by numbers and destroyed by bombs. One post of two guns of the 48th Machine-gun Battalion, posted just behind the front line at this point, were all knocked out, and from the nature of their wounds must have been killed by bombs. The sergeant in charge had evidently just emptied his revolver, and was in the act of reloading when killed.

The Austrians at this point showed considerable tactical ability and initiative, and were quick to develop their initial success.

The 1/5 Gloucesters found their left company taken in enfilade and reverse, and it was almost surrounded. Local counter-attacks by two platoons of the support company were unable to hold up the enemy advance, and the battalion, fighting obstinately, was gradually pushed back on to a line extending along the track leading from Cesuna to Pelly Cross, though the right posts of the right company managed to hold their position in the front line until the afternoon.

On the 5th Royal Warwicks' front the enemy penetrated the right company in the line at about 8 A.M., and were immediately almost on the top of Battalion Headquarters, which was situated less than 100 yards in rear of the right front trench.

The break-through was thus effected at a dangerously weak point, and control of the front-line defence was lost owing to the unfortunate position of the

headquarters. Battalion Headquarters put up a most gallant defence.

Major Blindloss, the commanding officer, was killed, rifle in hand, in leading a local counter-attack to retake the Visual Signalling Station; Major Watson, the second in command, was wounded, and the adjutant taken prisoner.

All officers being *hors de combat*, Regimental Sergeant-Major Townley, M.C., took command, and organising the survivors of the Battalion Headquarters into a defensive post, he obstinately held on to the position.

Although the right company had been practically annihilated, and the Austrians had penetrated to the depth of half a mile to the right and rear of Battalion Headquarters, this gallant party held grimly on for some four and a half hours until eventually relieved by a company of the 6th Royal Warwicks, and by their tenacity prevented the enemy break-through from spreading farther to the west. Regimental Sergeant-Major Townley received the D.C.M. for his cool and vigorous leadership, and there is no doubt that his magnificent conduct did much to minimise the danger of the situation at this part of the field.

In spite of this gallant defence, however, the enemy's advance was quite serious enough, and he had pushed forward practically to within 200 yards of the Cesuna and Lemerle Switches, occupying almost the whole of the pocket bounded by these switches, and temporarily capturing the guns of those batteries which had been in position within this area.

Meanwhile, in accordance with the provisions of the Divisional defence scheme, certain dispositions had already been made to meet the situation which eventually materialised. At 4.45 A.M. the 143rd Brigade received orders from the G.O.C. Division for the occupation of the Cesuna Switch by the support battalion—*i.e.*, 1/8 Royal Warwicks. The forward movement of this battalion was carried out with extreme promptitude, partly owing to the initiative of Captain Bridges, commanding the inlying picquet company, who intercepted the message and moved off without waiting for further orders. The head of the battalion passed Brigade Headquarters at 5.25 A.M., and the battalion proceeded immediately to garrison the switch with three companies in depth and one in reserve, with Battalion Headquarters at the Cesuna tunnel.

At about 8.30 A.M. the brigade major 143rd Brigade, who had been sent forward to ascertain the exact situation, found that the 1/8 Royal Warwicks were holding the switch with the exception of the southern end where it joined Mte. Lemerle, and where touch had been lost with the 1/5 Gloucesters. Major Corsan of C Battery, 240th Brigade, was bringing back the personnel of his battery, which had been surrounded and overrun by the enemy.

A very heavy fire was sweeping over Cesuna from the north-east, and the Austrians could be seen advancing in large numbers towards Guardiana and Clo. The danger-point was obviously at the southern end of the switch, and the temporary gap here had to be filled at once. Major Corsan, on being informed of the situation, immediately garrisoned Guardiana

with his men, and various small parties of gunners, R.E., trench mortar personnel, and some Italians were posted at the most dangerous points south of Guardiana to arrest the enemy's advance.

At this time, 9.30 A.M., the situation was for a short time critical. Luckily, sufficient information had arrived at Divisional Headquarters for the General to appreciate the situation, and to order the 1/7 Royal Warwicks at Magnaboschi to counter-attack, clear the switch, and contain the enemy in the pocket into which he had advanced. It must be explained that the 1/7 Royal Warwicks formed part of the Divisional Reserve, and had a rôle allotted them in the defence scheme to meet the very situation which had arisen.

The battalion moved forward towards Valle almost without a casualty, though the area was being very heavily shelled. The success of the advance was largely due to the fact of the battalion having already practised it twice on field-days. On approaching Valle the leading company was confronted with a sight of the enemy pouring through the trees south of Guardiana with very little to stop him except the guns of the 12th Battery, R.F.A., under Major Jardine, which were firing over open sights at a range of 600 yards. Guardiana House was by now in possession of the enemy.

To meet this ugly situation, Lieut.-Colonel Knox deployed his battalion with the greatest energy and skill, and assisted by the splendid behaviour of Jardine and his battery, the enemy was held and a strong front was established on a line running from Lemerle Switch in a north-westerly direction

to Brunialti, but excluding Guardiana, which had now been occupied by the Austrians.

To resume the narrative from the point of view of Divisional Headquarters, it is necessary to go back to 7.30 A.M., at which hour it must be remembered no information had been received as to an actual infantry attack. The G.O.C. had directed that a barrage on S.O.S. lines should not be put down unless an enemy attack was actually seen, as, to quote the words of his official report, "I considered it was not at all certain that the enemy would attack, and a premature S.O.S. barrage would be a great mistake in using up our own ammunition and energy uselessly, and encouraging the enemy by making him think he had diverted our artillery from the real attack." Messages received between 8.5 and 8.9 A.M. showed without doubt that an infantry attack had been launched, and at 8.11 the C.R.A. was ordered to put down the S.O.S. barrage in front of that part of the line in which infantry action was reported.

It was known afterwards that the enemy infantry had attacked more than an hour earlier, and the delay in the information reaching Divisional Headquarters, which was most serious, was due in the first place to the breakdown of communications, and in the second to the S.O.S. signals sent up from the front line not being seen owing to the mist and the height of the trees.

At 8.18 the G.O.C. 145th Brigade was informed of the situation, and he requested orders to be given to the 1/4 Royal Berks to move forward immediately to their battle positions. At 8.35 A.M., the

G.O.C. 144th Brigade was ordered to move the 1/6 Gloucesters from Serona Camp up to Carriola, and at 8.50 to bring up his two rear battalions—1/4 Gloucesters and 1/7 Worcesters—from the plain. This latter order necessitated an application to G.H.Q. for lorry transport, which was immediately met, and the two battalions reached the plateau some four and a half hours after the receipt of the order.

The G.O.C. 144th Brigade was sent for to Divisional Headquarters, and the situation explained to him. He was ordered to move the 1/6 Gloucesters to Magnaboschi. On arrival the battalion was to get in touch with the situation with a view to reinforcing the southern end of the Cesuna Switch, and preparing for a counter-attack to clear our forward area and re-establish the front line.

The dispositions ordered were, as it turned out, exactly right to meet the situation as it developed. In spite of the paucity of accurate information, support was given to the places where it was most needed, and in time to prevent the enemy indentation becoming really dangerous. G.H.Q., however, took a far more alarmist view of the situation than the commanders on the spot, and ordered a brigade of the 7th Division, which was in reserve, to move up to the plateau and concentrate near Casa di Fonte by 2 P.M.

From 6 A.M. onwards the enemy shelling of Divisional Headquarters and the back areas was spasmodic, and occasioned no great harm.

In order to make the course of the fight clear to the reader, it appears best to give the situation of the troops actually engaged with the enemy at 2 P.M.

and 8 P.M. To explain these situations certain bits of local fighting must first be chronicled.

On hearing of the straits of the survivors of the 1/5 Royal Warwicks, Brig.-General Sladen had ordered a company of the 6th Royal Warwicks from his Brigade Reserve to move up and relieve the pressure. A company under Captain Linfoot went forward at 12 noon with orders to take charge of all troops of the 5th Royal Warwicks, relieve the Battalion Headquarters, and endeavour to work east along our front-line trench and attack the enemy from the west.

Leaving his company in Contra Graser, Captain Linfoot, with an orderly, reached the 5th Royal Warwick headquarters at 12 noon, where he found R.S.M. Townley and a few men still holding out. Sending back for two platoons, he reinforced the Battalion Headquarters, and established positions with the rest of his company from our front trench at this point connecting up with the left of the 7th Royal Warwicks holding the Cesuna Switch.

A record must be made of the fact that shortly after the commencement of the attack the G.O.C. 20th Italian Division on our left offered the assistance of the troops under his command in any way that they could be used, and in particular suggested relieving the pressure on the 143rd Brigade by taking over our front line from our extreme left for 800 yards. This offer was accepted by Brig.-General Sladen, and, although the Italian troops taking over this bit of line were never engaged, as the attack did not reach as far west as this, the assistance afforded enabled him to hold more of

his troops in hand for counter-attack purposes, and might have been of the greatest value if the attack had developed farther to the west.

At about 1 P.M. Lieut.-Colonel Knox determined to clear the ruined house at Guardiana, which was strongly held by the enemy, as he correctly appreciated the fact that while this point was in enemy hands it could be used as a reception for reinforcements and for a starting-place whence the breach already effected might be extended to the west.

Three guns of the 12th Battery R.F.A. were put at his disposal for the purpose. Knox and Jardine, assisted by officers and men of the 1/7 Royal Warwicks, 12th Battery, and C/240 and D/240 Batteries, man-handled one of these guns forward into a position whence it could fire over open sights at Guardiana. Some rounds were fired, two or three direct hits made, and immediately afterwards Knox rushed the house with a platoon, killing or capturing the garrison. A further advance north-east through the woods was commenced, and Clo station was cleared, but not much further progress was made, the advance being held up by heavy machine-gun and rifle fire.

At 2 P.M. therefore the situation on the Divisional front was as follows: On the right the 1/4 Oxfords were still holding their Battalion Headquarters and the ridge immediately north of it (Hill 1021), their right flank bent back towards Boscon, where it was in touch with the left of the 23rd Division, their left flank astride the road just south of Pelly Cross. To the left the survivors of the 1/5 Gloucesters were holding Polygon Trench down to the junction of

this trench with the Cesuna Switch. The right of the Gloucesters was not, however, in touch with the Oxfords. In support the Bucks Battalion were holding the Lemerle Switch, while the 1/4 Royal Berks in reserve were disposed in artillery formation on the southern slopes of Mte. Lemerle.

The movements of the supporting troops of the right brigade were made much more difficult by the burning of the large artillery dump at Handley Cross. This dump was hit very early on in the day, and continued to explode for some hours. As it was situated at the cross-roads through which all traffic from rear to front had to pass, the resulting confusion, loss of time, and destruction of communications can be well imagined. Passing on to the left brigade, the 1/7 Royal Warwicks were holding the Cesuna Switch, Clo station, and Guardiana. The remnants of the 5th Royal Warwicks, reinforced by a company of the 6th Royal Warwicks, were holding their Battalion Headquarters and their old front line to the west of it. The 8th Royal Warwicks had one company in the Cesuna Switch north-east of Cesuna and the remainder of the battalion garrisoning that village, while the 6th Royal Warwicks, less the above-mentioned company, were still in Brigade Reserve between Cavrari and Cesuna.

The 144th Brigade had the 1/6 Gloucesters at Magnaboschi, the 1/8 Worcesters still in camp at Brusabo, and the 1/7 Worcesters and 1/4 Gloucesters were on their way up to the plateau in lorries.

At 2.30 P.M. the G.O.C. started to visit the headquarters of the three infantry brigades in turn, and got back to Divisional Headquarters about 4 P.M.

During the afternoon the situation had not altered materially, although the Oxfords, 5th Gloucesters, and 7th Royal Warwicks were continuously and heavily engaged in fighting, which was almost of a hand-to-hand nature. As a result of verbal conferences with the three brigade commanders and his personal appreciation of the situation on the spot, the G.O.C. ordered the 144th Brigade to attack at 6 P.M. with two battalions from the southern end of the Cesuna Switch, with a view to clearing the pocket and re-establishing our line. This attack was launched at 6 P.M. by the 6th Gloucesters, supported by the 7th Worcesters, and made some progress, but was held up after making good some 200 yards of ground by nests of machine-guns established in the thick woods of Buco di Cesuna.

At 8 P.M. the situation was approximately as follows: The right brigade were holding much the same line as at 2 P.M., but two companies of the 4th Royal Berks had been pushed forward to fill the gap between the left of the Oxfords and right of the Warwicks, and a continuous line was thus held. On the left of the 145th Brigade, the 144th Brigade counter-attack in liaison with the 7th Royal Warwicks had pushed forward the line to 200 yards north-east of the Cesuna Switch, and were heavily engaged at very close quarters. Of the two remaining battalions of the 144th Brigade, the 1/8 Worcesters had been moved to Carriola and the 1/4 Gloucesters to Magnaboschi.

On receipt of the news that the 6 P.M. counter-attack had been held up, the G.O.C. gave detailed orders for a combined counter-attack by all three

brigades to take place at 4.30 A.M. on the 16th. The 1/8 Worcesters were moved forward to Lemerle Switch, with orders to attack in conjunction with the 145th Brigade down the Pelly Cross Road. The 5th Gloucesters and 7th Worcesters, in conjunction with the 143rd Brigade on their left, were to attack north-east simultaneously, while the infantry advance was to be covered by artillery, machine-guns, and trench mortars. During the night, especially from 11 P.M. onwards, the enemy delivered a very intense and sustained rifle and machine-gun fire, the volume being so thick that movement was extremely difficult. To neutralise this our front-line troops expended a great quantity of S.A.A. which was sent up to them. Various officers in the front line declared afterwards that for pure intensity of fire they had never seen anything to equal this S.A.A. duel during the war. Fortunately, the enemy fire was mostly high and badly directed, and our casualties were in consequence comparatively light.

At 4.30 the combined counter-attack started, and made immediate progress. The Austrians had fought well for twenty-four hours, but by now they had had enough, and put up a poor resistance. As our men moved forward, prisoners, both wounded and unwounded, were taken in ever-increasing numbers, some of our own prisoners were released, and machine-guns, flammenwerfer, and other war material was found abandoned.

By 7.30 A.M. the whole of our old front line had been reoccupied with little opposition, and patrols were pushed out into No-Man's-Land.

At 7 A.M. Major-General Fanshawe with an A.D.G.

made a tour of the front on foot, and from his personal observation was able to estimate the thoroughness of the enemy's defeat. In the pocket temporarily occupied were lying a great number of Austrian dead. In certain places such as Clo station, Guardiano, and in front of Hill 1021, the bodies were thickly strewn, and gave vivid evidence of the toll taken by our riflemen. In addition, wounded and unwounded prisoners were trickling to our rear, and machine-guns, light mountain-guns, flammenwerfer, quantities of ammunition, bivouac tents, tools, rations, and all the impedimenta carried by attacking troops was lying about in profusion.

Our men had their "tails up," and were bursting with keenness to exploit the success still further.

Patrols were pushed forward at once into No-Man's-Land to gain touch with and harry the demoralised Austrians. The 144th Brigade sent forward officers' patrols to occupy Hills 972 and 1002, which captured 50 Austrians and 8 machine-guns; the 8th Worcesters two platoons into the enemy front line near Canove, where more prisoners were taken; and on the left the 6th and 7th Royal Warwicks cleared the woods on the northern slopes of the Ghelpac, capturing another 100 prisoners. Later a company of the 6th Royal Warwicks, supported by some of the 5th Royal Warwicks, moved forward on Ambrosini, entered the enemy's front line, and captured 2 officers, 3 machine-guns, and some 30 men.

Very definite orders were received from G.H.Q. that patrols were not to proceed if strong opposition was encountered, and as both at Canove and Ambrosini the enemy appeared to have reorganised

themselves, and were using machine-guns with some effect, orders were issued for the withdrawal of these patrols to our original front line.

In order to make the foregoing account of the fight as intelligible as possible to the reader, the doings of the infantry units actually engaged have been chiefly chronicled. It must be made clear, however, that practically every unit of the Division which was on the plateau at the beginning of the attack bore a more or less important part in the defence. Of the Divisional artillery, every battery was in action from 3 A.M. for some thirty-six hours. Every battery position was very heavily bombarded, but though many individual guns were temporarily placed out of action, no batteries were neutralised sufficiently to prevent them carrying on.

C and D Batteries of the 240th Brigade had a particularly strenuous time, being situated close to the southern end of the Cesuna Switch. The personnel of these two batteries behaved with the greatest gallantry, firing over open sights at short range, and using rifles as well. They played a great part in the closing of the gap at this important point. The heavy trench mortars had eight guns in action at the commencement of the attack. The four guns on the right were overrun by the enemy breakthrough, and had to be temporarily abandoned, but the four on the left were in action all day firing on the crossings of the Ghelpac north of Perghele, and on enemy reinforcements arriving *viâ* Ambrosini. Part of the personnel also assisted in the defence of the Cesuna Switch.

Of the light trench mortars the 145th Battery

had two guns behind Hill 1002, and one gun on each side of the Roncalto Road. Unfortunately the order for the withdrawal of the outposts did not reach the former, and they were almost surrounded. Eventually the guns were hidden and abandoned, the personnel attaching themselves to the 4th Oxforde, where they did excellent work as infantrymen.

The other two guns fired over 200 rounds in support of the S.O.S. barrage, and then fought with their rifles until the enemy were within thirty yards of both their flanks. The personnel subsequently attached themselves to the Oxforde, and took part in the counter-attack. All guns were regained early on the morning of the 16th.

The 144th Trench Mortar Battery was heavily engaged all day on the 15th just north of Lemerle, and took part in the counter-attacks of the 6th Gloucesters and 7th Worcesters. The 143rd Battery had five guns in the line and three in reserve just in rear of the 5th Royal Warwick Headquarters. The right guns of this battery were engaged from 6 A.M., and caused considerable damage to the enemy attempting to cross the Ghelapac.

The 5th Royal Sussex (Pioneer Battalion), together with 474th Field Company R.E., manned the Red Line in Magnaboschi Valley, in accordance with the provision of the defence scheme, and though not heavily engaged, formed a most useful second line in case the break-through had extended farther south.

The 475th Field Company R.E. were held in Divisional Reserve until the evening of the 15th,

when they were pushed forward to fill up gaps in the Lemerle Switch.

The 477th Field Company R.E. were lent to the 145th Infantry Brigade, and were sent to get into touch with the left of the 23rd Division.

Individuals only of this unit came into action, as the attack was held up a few hundred yards from the line they held. The Regimental Sergeant-Major and a few details held a small portion of the line at the R.E. dump near Pelly Cross during the early morning.

The 48th Machine-gun Battalion played a great part in the fight, but the tactical employment of a machine-gun battalion in an engagement of this nature is such that it is extremely difficult to chronicle the doings of the battalion without giving a detailed account of the doings of each section of guns. In accordance with their rôle in the defence scheme, these sections were somewhat widely distributed, and, owing to the breakdown of visual and telephonic communication at the beginning of the attack, had to adapt their tactics to the local situation and act on their own responsibility. At 3 A.M. on the 15th, D and B Companies were in the line supporting the right and left infantry brigades respectively. C Company were in support near Carriola, less two sections in reserve in the plains, and A Company were in reserve near Mte. Pau.

The greater part of the right company received the full weight of the attack on the Oxfords and 5th Gloucesters. The men fought splendidly, and many thousands of rounds were pumped into the advancing Austrians until the detachments were

practically surrounded, and had to destroy and abandon their guns. One section in position in the front line just south of Cunico Hill actually managed to hold on to their post till 5 P.M. on the 15th, when the survivors cut their way out, although entirely surrounded, and joined up with the left of the Oxfords near Pelly Cross. This company lost ten guns in all, but the majority of these were recovered in the counter-attack of the 16th. It is of interest that after being forced to abandon their guns and fight with the infantry, some of this company secured two Austrian machine-guns and used them effectively.

The left company held their positions throughout the day, and played an extremely important part in the defence of the Cesuna Switch. All the surviving personnel of these two companies, together with two sections of A Company, which had been sent up in close support, took part in the successful counter-attack on the morning of the 16th.

As soon as the front line was re-established, and while patrols were still operating in No-Man's-Land, the work of clearing the battlefield, repairing the damage done, and reorganising the dispositions of the Division was commenced. There was much to be done. Many of our own wounded had still to be collected and evacuated; there were large numbers of both wounded and unwounded prisoners to be collected and sent back; the burial of the dead had to be organised—no small task considering the number of Austrian corpses lying within the pocket and in the neighbourhood of the front line. The units which had suffered most severely had to be

relieved, the replenishing of dumps commenced, the making good of losses in equipment and material put in hand, captured arms and equipment collected, counted, and sent back, and, most important of all, the repair of the defence system undertaken. The latter included the filling of gaps in the wire, re-digging of trenches, reconstruction of dugouts and strong-points, clearance of roads and paths, and the re-establishment of signal communication. Fortunately, the Austrian artillery had apparently had enough to do on the 15th to keep them quiet for some time, and displayed hardly any activity. In fact, there was scarcely a round fired until the late afternoon, when some heavy stuff was put over on to the roads and back areas, without, however, causing much damage.

The 144th Infantry Brigade took over the right front from the 145th Infantry Brigade, and on the left the 6th Royal Warwicks relieved the 5th Royal Warwicks. By the evening it was possible to weigh up the results of the fight. The total casualties of the Division were :—

	Officers.	Other ranks.
Killed	16	135
Wounded	45	478
Missing	9	237

The captures consisted of—

	Officers.	Other ranks.
Unwounded prisoners . .	25	515
Wounded prisoners . .	9	179
5 mountain-guns, 48 machine-guns, 5 flamenwerfer, and a large quantity of rifles, ammunition, and equipment of all kinds.		

The number of Austrian dead which were found

on the Divisional front and eventually buried totalled 576. There can be little doubt that the great majority of his wounded were evacuated during the afternoon of the 15th and night 15th-16th, and it would be a conservative estimate to put this number at 1000. In actual personnel therefore the enemy lost at least 2400 to the British 920.

The 23rd Division on our right had had an experience somewhat similar to our own, but on a smaller scale. The Austrians had penetrated at two points—viz., S. Sisto, and on the extreme left of the Division. At neither of these points, however, did the indentation get to serious proportions, and the front was restored during the day by local counter-attacks. Farther still to the east the French held their ground successfully, and took a large number of prisoners. Only on the Piave did the Austrians have a temporary success. The operations on the Piave front down to the sea are fully described in the many histories of the war which have been written, and it is not part of the province of this book to describe them again here. It is only necessary to recall the facts that the enemy succeeded in capturing almost the whole of the Montello, and in creating a very large bridgehead at S. Donna di Piave and a smaller one at S. Andrea. It took the Italians a week of very heavy fighting to drive him back across the river and re-establish the line in its entirety. But the work was done very thoroughly, and by 22nd June the whole line was *in statu quo*, with the offensive spirit in the Austrian army finally broken.

That “every cock crows on his own dung-heap”

is a true and well-worn adage, but one may perhaps be pardoned for advancing the opinion that the failure of the grand Austrian offensive on 15th June and subsequent days marked the definite turn of the tide and the commencement of the final break-up of the Central Powers. It needs little imagination to picture what a great Austrian success would have meant to Ludendorff and the *morale* of the German Army. For the above reason, and also because for the first time in the Great War British troops were engaged against the Austrians, the battle of 15th June is of great historic interest.

To return to the Division, the 17th and 18th were spent in the hard work of repairing the damages caused by the offensive. There was much to be done, and every individual was busily occupied. Of fighting there was practically none. Doubtless the enemy had quite enough to do in withdrawing his artillery from advanced positions, relieving his tired troops, and replenishing his supplies.

During this period reports from brigades and units were carefully collated with a view to obtaining an accurate account of the operations, and to find out possible weaknesses and defects in the system of defence which could be remedied.

The narrative has been set forth above. It may be of interest to record the most important of the weaknesses disclosed, and the new lessons learnt or old ones emphasised.

1. The necessity of having strong-points behind the front line to—

- (a) Form position for the head of the supporting troops to the front line ;

- (b) Form rallying-points should the front line be penetrated ;
- (c) Form *points d'appui* from which reserves can counter-attack.

These points should be sited in order to block approaches along which the enemy are likely to attack.

In this connection it must be borne in mind that the Divisional commander had realised the necessity for these strong-points immediately the Division had taken over the sector. Several had been actually sited, and work commenced on one or two, but as the Division had only been in the sector for ten days, and there was a mass of other work to be done, no sufficient progress had been made to make the points of practical use.

2. Signal wires in the woods must be laid loosely along the ground. If attached to trees, they are invariably broken by other trees falling on them.

With regard to this, the question of signal communication in general in a thickly-wooded tract of country at an altitude of over 4000 feet and with no soil over the rock is one of the greatest perplexity. Buried lines are out of the question, owing to the insuperable difficulties of cutting through the rock, and however loosely the above-ground wires are laid, they are bound to be destroyed by heavy shelling. Our telephone and buzzer system practically ceased to exist from ten minutes after the opening of the bombardment until it was over, although the line-men of the Signal Company worked gallantly and indefatigably under the heaviest shelling in repairing breaks. Then again, however cunningly the visual stations are sited, it is about four to one that they

will be useless owing to the prevalence of cloud at this altitude. Again, the height of the pine-trees prevents S.O.S. signals being seen.

Wireless and despatch riders or runners are the only two efficient means of communication in a terrain of this description, and the commander who places reliance on other means than these will find himself compelled to fight his battle "in the dark."

3. All headquarters must be organised as strong-points, and every man must be trained to use a weapon and to know his duties in case of alarm. In this connection the defence of the headquarters of the 5th Royal Warwicks and 4th Oxfords may be instanced. The importance of every individual being trained in the use of the rifle cannot be over-estimated. In this particular engagement the gunners played a large part in holding up the enemy at vital points by the use of the rifle after the guns had been overrun. The necessity for the training of gunners in the use of the rifle was specially brought out in the C.R.A.'s report of the action, and to bring home his point he states: "On one occasion an officer had seven shots at a machine-gun team coming into action at forty yards and missed every time."

4. The value of each line pushing out its own outposts, and getting into touch by means of patrols with what is going on in front.

5. The necessity of liaison between units and the difficulty in keeping it in closely-wooded country.

6. The value of rehearsing counter-attack—*e.g.*, the small loss suffered by the 7th Royal Warwicks in proportion to the results achieved.

7. The uselessness of guns in thick woods when it

comes to close fighting, but, on the other hand, the very great value of guns in the open firing point-blank in holding up an attack.

8. The value of machine-guns in back positions—as an instance, those opposite Perghele.

9. The fatal mistake of creating a large dump of explosives at an important cross-roads.

10. The value of the 6-inch trench mortar and the Stokes gun against men and machine-guns in the open.

The following administrative lessons were also brought out:—

11. Transport lines must have regular shell stations, and a definite procedure must be laid down to be followed in case of hostile bombardment.

At the commencement of the attack somewhat heavy casualties were caused among certain first-line transport owing to the congested nature of the standings and the want of practice in getting men and animals out in the shortest possible time.

12. Brigade transport officers must have certain personnel and animals told off to stand by in order to take S.A.A., grenades, &c., right up to the fighting troops when required. On 15th June S.A.A. was twice delivered by pack animals to the right battalion within 500 yards of the enemy with very minor casualties. The Brigade Transport Officer must, however, remember that he will in all probability have to deliver water and rations to the troops every twenty-four hours. He must, therefore, keep sufficient animals in hand for that purpose.

13. Water should be kept at brigade first-line

transport lines in filled petrol tins. This ensures some supply in case of all pipes and tanks being rendered useless by shell-fire.

14. A small reserve of rations should be kept at all transport lines. This is invaluable for feeding orderlies, liaison personnel, police, &c., who are always passing to and fro during an action.

15. Additional personnel are required directly an action commences as follows :—

- (a) Police and personnel for battle-straggler posts.
- (b) Reinforcements for traffic control.
- (c) Escorts for prisoners.

In the case of an offensive these are always provided for and told off beforehand. In the case of a sudden enemy attack, however, they have not always been provided for in the defence scheme, and the omission has usually resulted in needless confusion, loss of time, and the eventual diversion of valuable fighting troops in the middle of a battle for the purpose.

On 19th June Major-General Sir R. Fanshawe was ordered to hand over the command of the Division and proceed to England for duty there. The news was received with the greatest consternation by all ranks. It was certainly the heaviest blow to the Division which it received during the war. Sir R. Fanshawe had commanded since May 1915, and had been the soul and inspiration of his command during the whole of the three years.

He had that rare and indefinable personality held by some but not all great leaders, which inspires blind confidence and belief in those under him.

A man of intense purpose, and of an almost

fanatical sense of duty, of total disregard for his personal safety and comfort, he was an unflinching and severe taskmaster. But combined with these qualities he had always an unfailing consideration for his officers and men, an extraordinary insight into character, and a knack of getting the best out of every one under him.

He was rather eccentric—most great men are,—and the men used to laugh at some of the peculiarities of “Fanny,” as he was nicknamed. But there was not one who would have refused to go straight into the mouth of hell if he told them it was the right thing to do. His character has always appeared to the writer to be somewhat similar to that of the great Confederate leader, Stonewall Jackson. What General Fanshawe did for the 48th Division only those who served in it will ever know. His excessive modesty and somewhat nervous manner with strangers entirely hid from them the real nature of the man. It was probably given to him to have as large a share in the wearing down and defeat of the Germans as any one individual similarly placed. Such, at any rate, is the opinion of his old comrades of the 48th Division.

During the afternoon and evening of the 19th the General went round to say good-bye to the various brigade and unit commanders. He left at 6 A.M. on the 20th. The troops wished to turn out, line the road, and wish him good-bye, but this was stopped by those who knew his hatred of ostentation and fuss.

His farewell message was :—

“On handing over the command of the Division,

I wish to thank all units for their devotion. I feel the parting so deeply that I will not say more than wish the Division collectively success under their new commander, and all ranks individually success during the remainder of the war and after it is over."

CHAPTER VI.

RAIDS.

BRIG.-GENERAL JULIAN STEELE, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., assumed temporary command on the 20th, and for four days more the Division continued the work of putting things straight after the battle.

We were relieved by the 7th Division on the 24th, 25th, 26th, by which date the Division was concentrated in a small and somewhat uncomfortable area at the bottom of the hills. Divisional Headquarters were at S. Rocco, with the troops in an area bounded by Sarcedo, Villa Verla, and Montecchio. The billets were bad and inadequate, the ground extremely broken and highly cultivated, and the heat intense. We all hoped we should not remain long in the locality, and our wish was gratified, as after a few days we were ordered to move back to our old haunt, the Trissino area. This move commenced on 30th June, and was finished by 2nd July.

On 4th July there was a review of Allied troops at Marostica by H.M. the King of Italy, at which he distributed immediate rewards given for the action of the 15th. The function was most interesting, although rather protracted. The British

troops were represented, amongst others, by a battalion from the 48th Division—*i.e.*, the 7th Royal Warwicks, who made a remarkably good impression by their handling of arms and steadiness in the march past. We were all particularly impressed by the splendid physique and discipline of a detachment of Czecho-Slovaks.

On this day Major-General Sir H. B. Walker, K.C.B., D.S.O., arrived from France to take over the command of the Division. I remember that he was unpleasantly astonished on arrival by the heat and enervating effect of the plains. We had, by gradual acclimatisation, got used to it, but there is no doubt that a sudden change from a temperate climate like France to the plains of Italy in July is a trying experience.

The following fortnight was spent in re-equipping, absorbing reinforcements, training in the early mornings and evenings, and frequent inspections. General Walker lost no time in making himself personally acquainted with his command. Before we moved forward again he was probably known by sight to 90 per cent of the men, and had spoken to 90 per cent of the officers. He inspired confidence to all those with whom he came in contact, and we realised that in our new commander we had a worthy successor to General Fanshawe.

On the 18th orders were received to relieve the 23rd Division in the Granezza area once more. The move was commenced on the 20th, the troops marching by night, and staging as before at Malo, Thiene, Fara, and Mare, and the relief was completed by 12 noon on the 23rd. We expected to

be going into the line for about a four-week tour. Any one prophesying that we should remain in the line seventeen weeks, and that when we next came out hostilities would have ceased, would have been derided as a lunatic. But so it came to pass.

The bracing air of the Altopiano proved a welcome change after the steamy heat of the plains. At this time of year the climatic conditions in fine weather are almost perfect in Northern Italy at a height of 5000 feet. The hot sun is nearly always accompanied by a cool pleasant breeze, nights are cool but not too cold, visibility good, and the scenery and surroundings at their best. The only disadvantage is the probability of frequent thunderstorms. During this August of 1918, however, these were far below the average. The area also had improved greatly, owing to the amount of work on it which had been carried out by successive British divisions since April. Trenches were safer, dugout accommodation better, new horse-standings had been made, and one or two new camps constructed. Above all, the cleanliness and sanitation of the whole area had been immensely improved, and now approximated more nearly to our ideas of what an area occupied by British troops should be like. On our right we joined up with the 24th French Division, and on our left with the British 7th Division.

We found things pretty quiet on our arrival, the enemy being apparently content with inactivity, provided he was left alone.

This state of affairs did not continue for long, however, and a period of artillery activity and

infantry raids commenced which became more and more frequent and effective as time went on.

On the first night after the relief—i.e., 24th July—the ball was opened by the 4th Oxforas, who captured four prisoners in a patrol encounter in No-Man's-Land.

On 2nd August the 8th Worcesters raided the railway cutting at Gaiga, and captured six prisoners. This was followed on 8th August by a series of raids by the 5th and 7th Royal Warwicks, 8th Worcesters, and 6th Gloucesters on S.M. Maddalena, Ave, Edelweiss Spur, and Gaiga.

These raids were undertaken in conjunction with the 24th French Division on our right and the 23rd British Division on our left. They were everywhere successful, the bag made by the 48th Division consisting of 128 unwounded and 19 wounded prisoners, at a cost of 10 killed and 60 wounded.

Shortly after this date extremely secret instructions were issued to certain individuals respecting a large-scale offensive which General Diaz, the Italian C.-in-C., had planned to take place in September. This was to be launched on a front of some forty miles on the northern front from Lake Garda to the Montello, and had as its objective the invasion of the Trentino. At this time Foch was striking blow after blow in France, and there is little doubt but that the Marshal was anxious for the Italian Higher Command to lend a hand by a blow against the Austrians.

I have no idea as to why the plan was contemplated of making a direct frontal attack on the

Trentino against almost impregnable mountain positions. There is no doubt, however, that it *was* contemplated, and the plan of attack was worked out in the most minute detail.

The particular part that the British Corps was to be called upon to carry out in this offensive was an attack by the 23rd and 7th Divisions on the Austrian front system, including the capture of Mte. Interotto and Spitz della Bisa, after which the 48th Division was to pass through and capture Mte. Erio.

The scheme of attack was most ambitious, and the more one looked into the details of it the less one liked it. The task assigned to the 48th Division seemed especially difficult, as, even with unqualified success on the part of the two leading divisions in taking a front-trench system of 1500 yards in depth, we had to pass through them, cross the precipitous gorge of the Val d'Assa, which was about 1500 feet in depth with sides of an average gradient of 1 in 5 and no bridges or even tracks across it, scale the opposite heights, and attack an objective some two miles farther on.

Strict orders were issued from G.H.Q. that no one was to be informed of the projected attack except G.O.C. Divisions, Brigadiers, and the G.S.O. 1 and A.A. and Q.M.G. of each division. Thus the task of working out details was rendered even more difficult, as it was impossible to discuss the scheme with unit commanders and the staffs of brigades. It was, nevertheless, absolutely imperative to establish forward dumps of material and stores likely to be required, and in order to conceal

the real import of these, an elaborate piece of camouflage was circulated to the effect that Intelligence had been received by G.H.Q. pointing to the intention of the enemy to retire shortly beyond the mountains in our front, and that we were to be ready to pursue at the shortest notice. Whether this camouflage deceived unit commanders, other officers and men, I do not know. In all probability they were not sufficiently inquisitive to bother about the motive. Four years of war had taught the regimental officer not to be surprised at anything, and not to put too much faith in glaringly obvious preparations. It may, however, have had the effect of deceiving enemy agents and spies, which after all was what was wanted. It will be easily imagined that the working-out of the details of this attack gave much work and anxious thought to those "in the know," and the establishment of forward dumps, the drawing and issuing of special equipment, stores, munitions, &c., plenty of occupation to the rest of the Division.

With a view to finding out everything possible about the enemy's intentions and *morale*, the policy of frequent raids was continued. On 24th August the 8th Worcesters and 6th Gloucesters carried out a very small excursion against the enemy's outposts at Sec and Ave, resulting in the capture of 6 prisoners.

Two nights later the 145th Infantry Brigade carried out a much more ambitious raid with two battalions, the Bucks and the 4th Royal Berkshires. The objectives in this case were again Sec and Ave, with the addition of S.M. Maddalena. The reader will be surprised that raids were conducted so often

on the same localities. The reasons for this were that, firstly, the points chosen were the most easily accessible; and secondly, that after a raid the Austrians always increased the strength of the garrison at the place raided, and in consequence there was more chance of a large bag.

The plans for this raid were worked out in the greatest detail, as much practice had by now brought the co-operation between the infantry and artillery employed in operations of this kind to the highest pitch of perfection. Each arm knew that the other would play their exact part to the exact time, and each had therefore complete confidence in the other. To quote the words of an infantry officer who took part in the raid: "The artillery barrages were perfect on all lines, and the timing of the 'lifts' could not have been better."

Everything went according to plan. Our men found the Austrian trenches thickly held, and experienced a good many casualties in getting through the wire. This whetted their temper, and when they got in with the bayonet there was little quarter given for the first few minutes. It was estimated that at least 150 Austrians were killed, and the total may have been much larger to judge from the number of men who returned with blood-stained bayonets. One hour and fifty minutes was allowed for clearing up the raided area, at the end of which time our troops withdrew precisely to the timetable laid down. 2 officers, 11 wounded and 197 unwounded prisoners, representing seven different regiments, were brought back, while the total British casualties amounted to 14 killed and 11 officers and

141 men wounded, of whom 50 were able to remain at duty.

The G.O.C. received the following message from the Commander-in-Chief on the results of the raid :—

“Please convey my hearty congratulations to men of Bucks Battalion and 1/4 Royal Berks, and to Brig.-General Watt and staff on their gallant, well-planned, and successful raid. The results are of the greatest importance in ascertaining the enemy's intentions.”

The unfortunate garrison of Sec was given little rest, for after one night's grace they were again attacked on the 28th, this time by a small party of the 4th Gloucesters, who destroyed the enemy found, with the exception of three prisoners, who were brought back for identification purposes.

Meanwhile preparations for the secret offensive went on apace. Large dumps were established at the most forward spots possible, reserve rations, forage and ammunition were accumulated on the plateau, pack transport was reallocated to units, most carefully-worked-out tables were arranged showing exactly what each unit was to carry and how the carrying was to be done, and the troops not in the line were given tactical exercises based as far as possible on the actual tasks they would have to perform in the offensive. All these preparations were, of course, camouflaged by the spreading of the rumour that the Austrian retirement was imminent, and that we were making ready to pursue. At this time the news from France was getting better every day. On 3rd September the Commander-in-Chief came up to Granezza to distribute immediate

rewards which had been granted in connection with the successful raids during August, and at the end of the parade he informed us that news had just been received of the breaking of the Hindenburg Line. These continued reports of successes from the decisive theatre of war were received by all ranks of the Division with mingled feelings. There was, of course, intense satisfaction and enthusiasm at the results obtained, but this was somewhat tempered by the feeling that we were out of it, and were not pulling our weight in the closing stages of the campaign. Could we have foreseen the decisive events of the next two months we should have been quite content to wait for our share of the final victory.

Towards the end of August the weather became more broken, and a period of rain and fog set in, which made conditions on the plateau less pleasant. The area was, however, so well organised by this time, and every one so used to their surroundings, that no real hardships were endured. The fact of the front line being at 800 feet lower altitude than the reserve area was all to the good, as the result was that troops in the front line who had necessarily to be more exposed than when in reserve got less fog and cloud and much better weather. Frequently one left Granezza wrapped in a thick damp cloud, and on arrival at the front line found the whole area bathed in sunshine.

On 6th September hints were received that the projected offensive might be postponed or abandoned, and on the 8th definite orders were received that it was to be cancelled. This was a great relief to

those who knew the terrain over which operations were to take place, and who had worked out the attack in detail. Although the *morale* of the British divisions was at its height and the troops in splendid fighting trim, the odds against success were great, and a failure or even a partial failure would probably have resulted in resuscitating the rapidly weakening *morale* of the Austrian Army. In fact the whole plan was so fantastic and contrary to the elements of common-sense, that it seems almost impossible to believe that there was ever a serious contemplation of carrying it through.

After ten days' rest the Austrians were raided again on the night of 9th September. This time the 4th Oxforas went for Sec, while the 5th Royal Warwicks, employing their whole battalion, made an attempt on the railway cutting at Gaiga. The Oxforas were entirely successful, capturing 31 prisoners with very few casualties. The 5th Royal Warwicks were unlucky. Owing either to faulty timing, or the short shooting of a heavy battery, the leading companies got mixed up in our own barrage, and suffered considerable casualties before reaching their objectives. The Austrians were very much on the *qui vive*, and severe hand-to-hand fighting took place. Only 10 prisoners and 3 machine-guns were brought back, and the battalion had about 90 casualties, but a number of the enemy were killed, and on the balance fared worse than our men.

On this day we were informed of the probability of the whole of the British force being transferred to France in the immediate future, and as a pre-

liminary each division was to be reduced from twelve to nine infantry battalions.

The three battalions from the 48th Division selected to go were the 1/5 Gloucesters, the 1/8 Royal Warwicks, and the 1/8 Worcesters. These units left the plateau on the following day, and after three days allowed for re-equipping and collecting their detachments they entrained for France on the 13th. We were all sorry to lose these three splendid battalions. They went off full of enthusiasm with their tails well up, while the rest of the Division wished them good luck, with some slight feelings of envy and jealousy that they were not going too.

On the 11th Lord Cavan proceeded on leave for a fortnight, and General Walker took over the duties of C.-in-C. during his absence. On the night of the 22nd the 7th Worcesters raided Morar, and brought back 3 prisoners without sustaining any casualties. There was the usual enemy shelling in retaliation, and the Division suffered an irreparable loss in the death of Lieut.-Colonel Knox, D.S.O., commanding the 7th Royal Warwickshires, who was killed in the early hours of the 23rd by a direct hit from an Austrian shell in his dugout at S. Sisto, the right front Battalion Headquarters. Knox had commanded his battalion with skill, courage, and uniform success since 1916. No more popular or capable C.O. existed, and had he lived he would no doubt have been given command of a brigade at no very distant date. He was buried the same evening at Granezza, and the whole Division felt that they had lost a very gallant and very brilliant officer.

The weather during the last fortnight in September turned very wet. Almost every afternoon brought a violent thunderstorm, and on the plateau we lived in an almost perpetual cloud. Under these conditions the ground rapidly became a quagmire.

At this time rumours as to our return to France were frequent and changeable. On the 23rd we were informed pretty definitely that the 7th Division would move on about 6th October, the 23rd on 16th October, and ourselves on 30th October. With a view to the withdrawal of the British forces we had been working hard since the cancellation of the offensive at clearing all surplus stores, dumps, &c., from the plateau. This work proceeded apace, and by the 24th a very large proportion of the surplus ammunition and stores had been safely removed to the plains. On that afternoon we received sudden orders to stop the evacuation, as there was a possibility of the projected offensive taking place after all.

The repeated changes of instructions at this time were most bewildering and hard to keep pace with. On the one hand, we felt it was necessary to keep a sufficient reserve with us for an offensive should it be ordered. On the other hand, we had to bear in mind the possibility of being withdrawn from the plateau at a week's notice, and being responsible for the clearing of all British stores from the area.

These changes, however harassing to the subordinate commands, must at least have had one good result. The Austrian Intelligence Service

must have been utterly and completely in the dark as to the intentions of the Commando Supremo. If each British Divisional Commander had had an Austrian spy acting as his A.D.C., and if each of these had had a private wire to Vienna, I am prepared to bet that at the end of September the Austrian C-in-C. would have been in a complete fog as to what eventualities he was to prepare for.

On 30th September I made the following note in my diary: "The offensive is now again definitely off apparently, and we shall probably stay in the line for another fortnight. The move to France is also definitely postponed, as, owing to the great successes there, the trains for moving us cannot be spared." Meanwhile we proceeded with ordinary trench routine and raids.

On the night of 3rd October the 6th Royal Warwicks went in to Ave, employing their whole battalion. This raid again went without a hitch, and, at the cost of 3 killed and 25 wounded, the battalion brought back 4 officers and 146 other ranks as prisoners.

On 8th October we heard confidentially that Lord Cavan was to be given an army to be composed of one British and one Italian corps, and that preparations were being made for a large-scale offensive on the Piave front. The 48th Division was to remain on the plateau, forming part of the XIIth Italian Corps, which had now taken over the line on our left. Meanwhile most secret arrangements were being made for the transference of practically the whole of the remainder of the British troops to the Piave front. Very elaborate pre-

cautions were taken to try and prevent the knowledge of this move reaching the enemy, even down to such subterfuges as dressing up the officers and men of reconnoitring parties in Italian uniforms. The Austrian Intelligence system was, however, so good that, as we heard after the Armistice from Austrian staff officers themselves, they knew of the move before it even commenced. What, however, did completely muddle them was the leaving behind on the plateau of the 48th Division. They imagined that all the British troops would be kept together.

On 10th October the 7th Worcesters raided Sec again, expecting to make a large bag. The raid went exactly to plan, but our men found a very small garrison, and only secured 32 prisoners. The French Division on our right, however, who raided at the same time, found the front line opposite them packed with troops, and brought back over 300 prisoners.

On 11th October G.H.Q. left Lugo, and proceeded to the Piave district. We felt isolated and rather neglected, and it was a matter of some difficulty to assimilate ourselves to working under an Italian corps. The Corps Commander, General Pennella, was kindness and courtesy itself. The staff, however, worked on a somewhat different system from that we had been accustomed to, and the delay caused by the necessity of having all written orders translated, together with the fact that they were usually issued at very short notice, made things rather awkward at first. We had a spell of extremely bad weather until the 19th, by which time everything on the plateau was getting into a

bad mess, and the troops had a poorish time. We were informed by G.H.Q. that we should be taken out of the line shortly, and would move down to join the rest of the corps on the Piave, and with this in view we were told to push on with the evacuation of the large reserves of British stores, equipment, and ammunition still remaining on the plateau. The Italian XIIth Corps and Sixth Army, however, thought differently, and certainly imagined that we were to be left to operate under them for an indefinite time. The position of being under a dual control was an almost impossible one. We were supposed to be under our own G.H.Q. for all administrative services, and at the same time under the Italians for tactical purposes. For example, the Italian Sixth Army might order us to make an attack, but we should have to apply to our own G.H.Q., sixty miles away, for extra ammunition, lorries, supplies, &c., in order to be able to carry it out. Things came to a climax on the evening of the 19th, when we received sudden orders from the XIIth Corps to prepare to take part in a most difficult attack within four days' time. On this very day we had been assured by our own G.H.Q. that we were not to be used in the mountains, and would be moved down to rejoin the British Corps almost at once. We were between the devil and the deep sea, and did not know what to do for the best. The threatened attack was almost the same one which had been staged at the end of August, and included as the first task of the 48th Division the crossing of the Val d'Assa and capture of Monte Erio. Apart from the short-

ness of time for the necessary preparations we had not got the supplies, ammunition, and extra transport requisite for the operation, and the British G.H.Q. were much too busy arranging for the Piave attack to be able to spare lorries for us. On the morning of the 20th a staff officer was sent personally to Lord Cavan to explain the situation to him, and on representations being made by him to the Commando Supremo a working agreement was reached, under which he was to be informed in advance of any projected operations in which we were to take part, and had the power of veto if he thought fit to use it.

Anyhow on the 20th we were informed that the attack would probably be cancelled, and on the 21st this was definitely confirmed. In view, however, of the uncertainty of the position and the many conflicting orders received, we ceased the evacuation of any stores we should be likely to want in case we did advance.

Our worries were added to by the non-arrival of the supply pack-train on two different dates, which reduced our reserve rations on the plateau to two days.

Shortly before this time the 477th Field Coy. R.E. was detached from the Division, and moved to the Piave, where it took part in the operations of Lord Cavan's army and the victorious advance. This company rejoined the Division after our return to the Valdagno area in November.

On the night of the 23rd-24th a series of raids were ordered by the Sixth Army. The French on our right secured 761 prisoners; our share was

carried out by the 4th Gloucesters, who went in at Ave and S.M. Maddalena. This again was an unqualified success, and 6 officers and 223 other ranks were brought in as prisoners at the expense of 4 wounded on our side.

The Italians on our left did three small raids, and took 14 prisoners. On the morning of the 24th the big attack on the Piave started, and by midday we had news of good progress made.

From the statements of prisoners taken about this time it appeared probable that the enemy opposite us intended to retire from their advanced line in front of Asiago to the "Winter Stellung" line some 1500 yards to the rear, which ran along the base of the mountains forming the northern boundary of the Asiago Plain. Our orders were to watch for this movement, and follow it up at once.

No definite information, however, was gained until the night of the 29th, when the Bucks Battalion made a large-scale raid on the area Sec-S.M. Maddalena-Cassodar. They found the whole area empty, with the exception of one wretched man who had been left behind to fire off Verey lights, the enemy having retired to the Winter Stellung in rear that very evening at dusk. French and Italian patrols on our right and left found a similar state of things, and early on the 30th our patrols had pushed well beyond Asiago, and gained touch with the enemy in the Winter Stellung. The final phase was at hand.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ADVANCE INTO THE TRENTINO.

THE events of the next few days were of such an extraordinary nature that I propose to set them out in as much detail as possible, and to supplement them with a short Appendix, containing the operation orders and other instructions issued from Divisional Headquarters.

On the 30th patrols were pushed out as far as the line Camporovere-Bosco-Mte. Catz, and in every case the Winter Stellung was found to be strongly occupied. There was no particular reason to suppose that the enemy intended to go right back. It seemed incredible that he should deliberately give up the almost impregnable positions guarding the Trentino. On the other hand, our main attack on the Piave was making very rapid progress, and frequent reports were received of the demoralisation which had set in amongst the Austrian troops. With a view therefore to the possibility of a general retreat on our front, plans for an attack by the Division on the line Camporovere-Mte. Catz were prepared, and brigades were warned to be ready to act on short notice. Meanwhile patrols of the 145th and 144th Brigades kept in close touch with

the Winter Stellung line, but they were unable to gain a footing in it anywhere, as it was strongly held by machine-gun detachments, supported by artillery. During the 30th and 31st the enemy showed more artillery activity than he had done for months past, shells of all calibres, including a good deal of gas, being fired indiscriminately into our areas.

On the evening of October 31st-1st November General Odry, commanding the 24th French Division on our right, informed General Walker that he intended to raid Sisemol, and, if it was found unoccupied, to attack Longara.

As a forward move by the French would materially assist the Division in the attack on Mte. Catz, warning orders were issued to brigadiers, and the plan of attack was explained to them personally.

Just after midnight Captain Gamlen, the Liaison Officer with General Odry, rang up to say that Eck and Covola were unoccupied, and that the French would attack Longara at 5 A.M.

Permission having been obtained from the G.O.C. XIIth Italian Corps, General Odry was informed that the 48th Division would attack at 5.45, and operation order G.A. 3 (*vide* Appendix) was issued.

The attack was launched at 5.45 by the Bucks and the 4th Royal Berks Battalions of the 145th Infantry Brigade on the right, and the 4th and 6th Battalions Gloucestershire Regiment of the 144th Infantry Brigade on the left.

Considering the shortness of notice, the distance to the objectives, and the nature of the country to be crossed, the performance of starting the attack to time was a remarkable one.

To quote one example, the Bucks Battalion, which was in reserve at Kaber Laba, received the order at 1 A.M., and had to enter the Winter Stellung, seven miles distant, at 5.50.

The attack was completely successful on the right. By 7 A.M. the Bucks had reached the summit of Mte. Catz, and by 7.30 the Royal Berks had reached Roccolo north-east. The whole of the garrison had been killed or captured, and touch gained with the French at the Quarry. Some hundreds of prisoners, quantities of machine-guns, and over 60 howitzers and field-guns were taken.

The Bucks Battalion had met with considerable opposition and very heavy shelling, some of the Austrian guns being served until the last moment, when the gunners took out the breech-blocks and decamped hurriedly. Considering the nature of the fighting, the battalion's casualties, consisting only of 9 killed and 31 wounded, must be accounted as extraordinarily light.

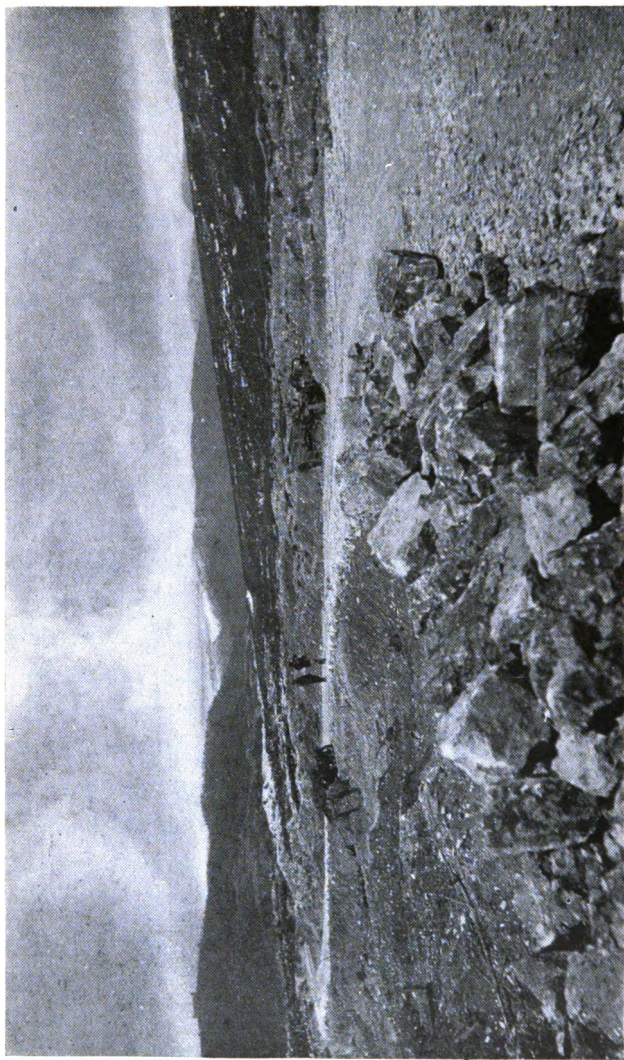
On the left the 144th Infantry Brigade had met with determined opposition from Goodwood Trench, on the lower slopes of the Mte. Interrotto-Mte. Rasta ridge, and were driven back into Camporovere and out of Bosco with considerable casualties. It was evident that for the moment the Austrians were determined to hold on to the southern end of the Val d'Assa.

At 12 noon on 1st November the G.O.C. decided to exploit the success on the right, and for this purpose allotted the 7th Worcesters (the reserve battalion of the 144th Infantry Brigade) to the 145th Infantry Brigade, with orders to capture

the C. Carlini-C. Sichestal Line, and thence to attack Mte. Mosciagh, thus turning the Interrotto position; while the 144th Infantry Brigade were to essay once more the capture of Goodwood Trench and Interrotto. This attack was to take place at dawn on 2nd November. Early on the 1st the 474th and 475th Field Coys. R.E., together with one company of the 5th Royal Sussex, under the C.R.E., Lieut.-Colonel Briggs, D.S.O., were put on clearing the road through Asiago and up to Camporovere. They performed most excellent work, and had cleared away the débris sufficiently for limbers to get through by that evening.

Meanwhile the G.O.C. 20th Italian Division on our left had offered to assist by a frontal attack from the south. General Walker, however, declined this sporting offer in view of the heavy casualties likely to be incurred by the carrying out of such an operation in broad daylight. The 143rd Infantry Brigade, which had up to now been in reserve, was concentrated in the Asiago area, with orders to move up the Assa as advanced guard as soon as the Interrotto-Mosciagh situation permitted. A section of 18-pounders and two 4.5-in. howitzers were attached to this brigade.

The attack duly took place at dawn on 2nd November, and was immediately successful. The 7th Worcesters and the 4th Oxfords attacked Mte. Mosciagh and Mte. Dorbelle, both of which were captured by 7.30. The left brigade, attacking at the same time, found Goodwood Trench evacuated, and our men were on the top of Interrotto by 8 A.M.



CANOVE CROSS ROADS. LOOKING NORTH.
INTEROTTO BARRACKS IN LEFT BACKGROUND.

The head of the 143rd Infantry Brigade, as advanced guard, entered the Val d'Assa at 10 A.M., our left flank being protected by the 20th Italian Division advancing on Verena, and our right by the 4th Oxfords, who were ordered to occupy and hold Mte. Meatta, a height of nearly 6000 feet. On the summit, which was enveloped in cloud, were a garrison of about 100 Austrians, who put up a sharp fight, but were speedily put to flight by the leading company of the Oxfords.

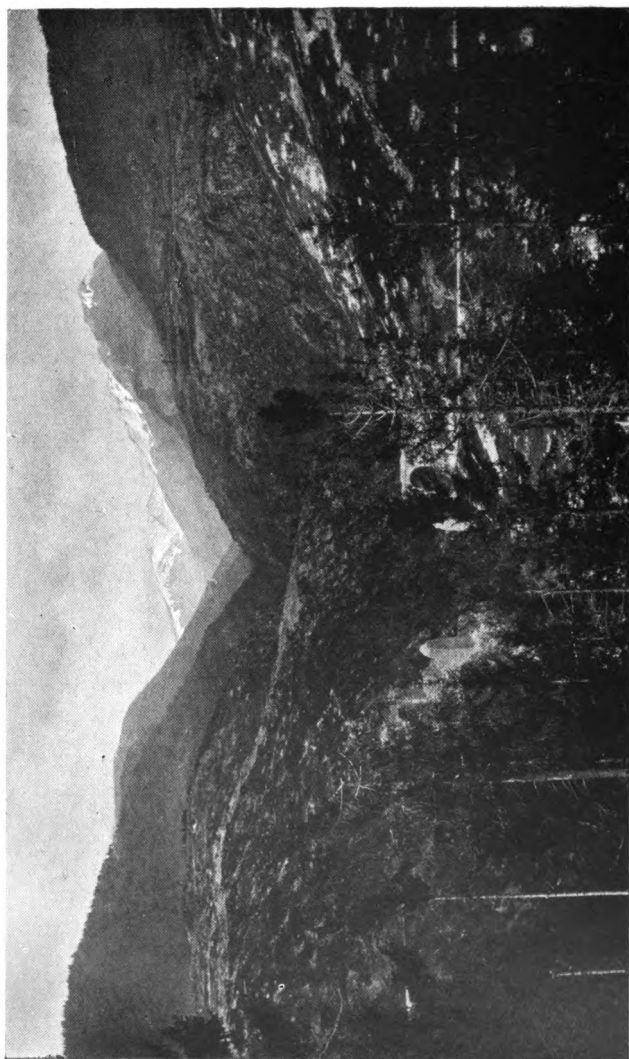
The advanced guard pushed on rapidly, and in spite of some resistance by isolated machine-gun detachments had reached the junction of the Val d'Assa and Val Portule by 1 P.M., and two hours later passed Porrechie d'Avanti. It is hardly necessary to say that the latter place was immediately christened "Porridge Corner" by the men!

At 2 P.M. an advanced Divisional Report Centre was established at Camporovere, and during the afternoon Divisional Headquarters moved to S. Sisto. Fortunately for us such a state of rot had set in in the enemy ranks that only the most elementary efforts had been made to delay our advance by destroying the road. Across the old No-Man's-Land it was in bad condition, owing chiefly to our shelling. This got worse as the enemy front system was traversed, until, at and around Camporovere, it was almost impassable. Our own Pioneer Battalion and the 474th and 475th Field Coys. R.E. were, however, already hard at work repairing and widening this, and were shortly supplemented by an Italian special road detachment sent up from the Sixth Army, who did really good work. The road

enters the gorge of the Assa about a kilometre north-west of Camporovere, and is cut out of the side of the mountains. On the east are the precipitous slopes of Rasta, Interrotto, and Mosciagh. To the west is a clear fall of nearly 1000 feet to the Assa torrent. At one point the Austrians had made a badly-executed effort to blow a crater in the road. Luckily it had only destroyed half of it, and even without repairs it was just possible for vehicles to get round. Had they blown two or three really big craters right in the middle they would have held us up until these could have been bridged. There was no way round.

The south-eastern end of the Val d'Assa is one of the most gloomy bits of scenery in the world. Both the heights to the right and the depths to the left are heavily wooded. Owing to the height of the mountains the sun never falls on the road except for an hour or two at midday, and one can well credit the local legend that a visit to this region gave the poet Dante the inspiration and setting for his "Inferno." At the entrance the gorge is about a mile wide, but narrows down gradually to Porrechie d'Avanti, where it turns sharply due west. At Val di Portule were a large number of Austrian huts, well fitted-up with stoves, tables, chairs, wire-beds, &c. Every kind of abandoned equipment was littered about, sure evidence of the hurry and disorganisation of the enemy retreat.

Still the advance guard pushed on, and by dusk had reached the line Vezzena-Marcia-di Sotto, where they were in touch with the enemy, who appeared to be in considerable strength.



VAL D'ASSA FROM CANOE.

Meanwhile the 145th Infantry Brigade had concentrated in the Val Portule, and the 144th Infantry Brigade just north of this in the Val d'Assa. Up to this time some 3000 prisoners, several hundred guns, and much booty had fallen into our hands. At 5 P.M. the advanced Divisional Report Centre was moved forward to the Val Portule.

It was decided to resume the attack at dawn in accordance with orders received from the XIIth Italian Corps for the continuance of the advance, with the object of securing Caldonazzo and Levico, and thus blocking the Val Sugana.

The 20th Italian Division on our left, who had succeeded in effecting the crossing of the Assa during the preceding night, had reached the area Bosco di Poselaro-Valle del Trughele, while on our right the light column of the 14th Italian Division, which had taken the place of the 24th French Division, had reached Bocchetta di Portule. Information from the Sixth Italian Army intimated that the famous Edelweiss Division was expected to be holding the Mte. Rovere defensive systems, where the enemy was expected to make a final stand.

At 6 P.M. orders for the resumption of the advance on the morrow were issued in Order No. 56 (*vide* Appendix).

It had been a wonderful day, and events had succeeded each other in bewildering rapidity. Every report received at Divisional Headquarters during the day recorded successes and progress made beyond the expectations of the most optimistic. But even then I doubt if any of us realised that

this was really the end of Austria as a military power, and that we were taking part in one of the most decisive advances in military history. There was little sleep for any one that night: the excitement of the advance and the possibilities of the morrow kept one screwed up to full pitch. Speaking personally, I was full of anxiety as to how we were to keep pace with the advance from a supply point of view. We had got no reserve mechanical transport to fall back on except a somewhat hazy promise of fifty extra Fiat lorries to be found by the Italian Corps. I could not place too much reliance on this. The Italian divisions were always supplied with mechanical transport to an almost unlimited extent, and the Corps staff could not, or would not, understand that we were not in a similar position. Our own G.H.Q. was far away and too much occupied to help us with extra lorries, even if there had been any available, which there were not.

From 30th October, when the advance first became a likely contingency, I had been bombarding the Italian Corps with requests for an extra fifty lorries to be put at our disposal. My request had always been received in the same way—by a cordial and optimistic promise that there would be any amount of transport available whenever we really wanted it. But one could get nothing definite.

In order to explain the difficulties to be foreseen from a Q. point of view in keeping up with the advance, it is necessary to recall the system of supply before the advance commenced.

Our railhead was at Villa Verla. Thence rations

were drawn in bulk by the Divisional train to Fara, where they were split up and taken over by the 1st Line Transport of units on the plateau. The 1st Line Transport was divided into two echelons, A and B.

B Echelon lived at Fara, and took rations half-way up the mountains to a place called Schiessere. Here they were met by A Echelon, who lived at Granezza, and worked between there and Schiessere. From Granezza supplies were delivered to units by L.G.S. waggons or pack animals of the 1st Line. B Echelon were supplemented by a pool of vehicles and animals, consisting of some artillery teams and a certain number of L.G.S. waggons and mules from an Auxiliary H.T. Company.

Three days' reserve rations were supposed to be kept at Granezza, but, owing to the non-arrival of the pack-train on several occasions, two of these days had been consumed when operations commenced.

On 31st October, when an advance first appeared to be really probable, the B Echelons had been ordered to come up to the plateau, and were put at the disposal of units; and it was arranged that supplies should be delivered by lorry at Granezza instead of by the staging method of 1st Line Transport. At this moment the total number of lorries available were twenty-two 3-tonners and sixteen 30-cwt. Fiats of the 48th M.T. Company. They were increased during subsequent days to twenty-eight 3-tonners and twenty-eight Fiats. As soon as it was ascertained on 1st November that the attack was making good progress and that a considerable advance was probable, orders were issued for

a scheme of supply during an advance through the mountains (*vide* Appendix).

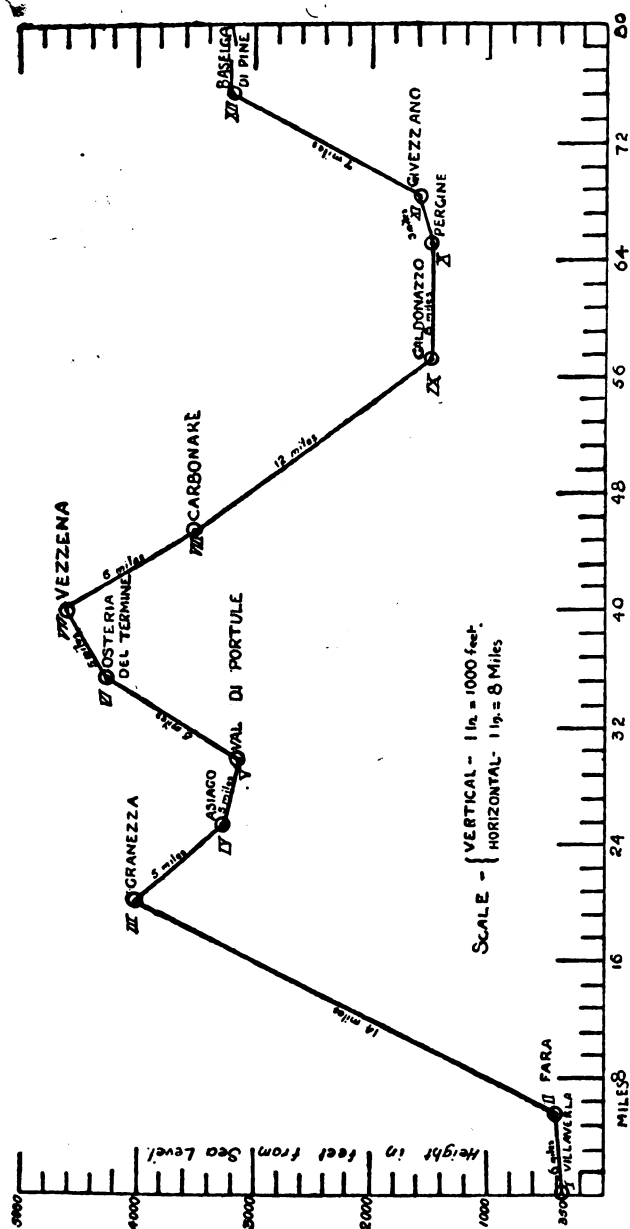
In point of fact the Italian lorries were not forthcoming on 1st November, and even on 2nd November only twenty-three turned up very late out of the fifty promised.

On 2nd November rations were brought to Granezza by our own 3-ton lorries, and thence during the evening to Asiago by Italian Fiats.

Lorry-head was fixed for 3rd November at Asiago. Supply officers and details arrived there during the afternoon of the 2nd, and began establishing a dump ready for the next morning. At about 9 P.M. on 2nd November I explained to the Divisional commander in great detail what arrangements we were making for supplies, and expressed to him my apprehension that we might not be able to keep up with the rate of advance, and that there was a really serious danger of the troops finding themselves beyond the reach of food and ammunition, especially if the weather was to break.

General Walker weighed up the situation carefully, and explained that the stakes we were playing for were so high, and that there was such a chance of dealing the Austrians an absolutely knock-out blow, that he was willing to take the risks of the supply system breaking down. He was also of the opinion that we might be able for a few days to exist on captured stores. Certain modifications in the supply orders had to be made that night. The advance guard were already so far ahead that it would be impossible for their 1st Line Transport to get back to Asiago to draw rations. I there-

DIAGRAM TO ILLUSTRATE "SUPPLY SYSTEMS IN THE ALPS" BY LT COL A H ROBERTS, D.S.O., O.B.E.



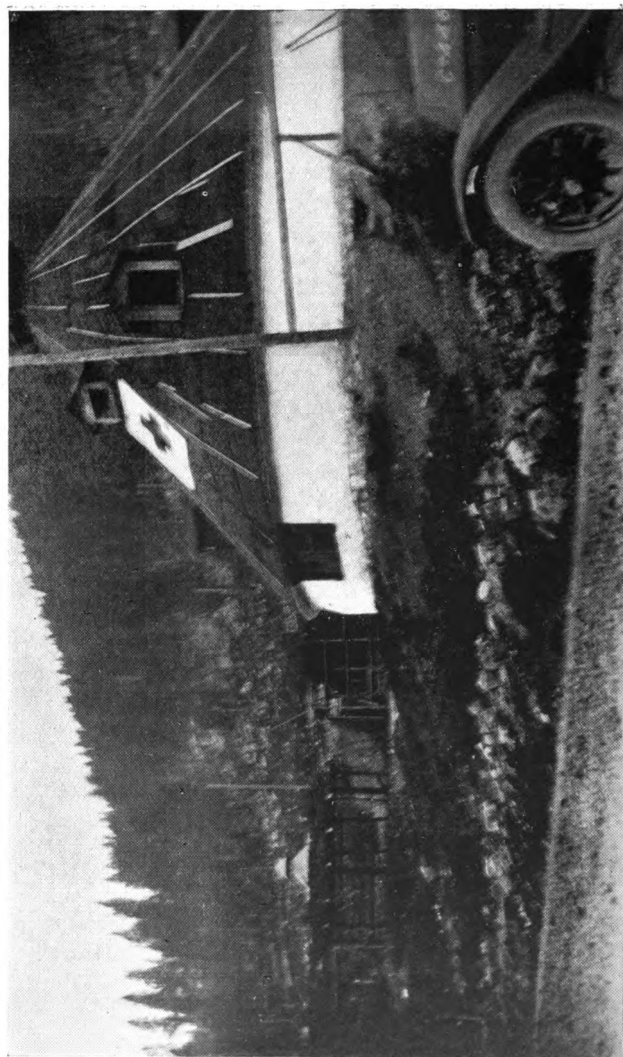
fore detailed six Fiats to start at 4 A.M. on the 3rd and take the rations for the 4th inst. right up to the headquarters of the units of this brigade wherever they might happen to be. Four more Fiats loaded with S.A.A. were similarly ordered to start off and proceed right up to the advance guard. As it so happened, this ammunition was never required.

At 3.15 A.M. on the 3rd, G.A. 16 was issued (*vide* Appendix). We started from S. Sisto at 6 A.M. I stopped for half an hour at Asiago to see that the dump was working properly there, and then proceeded to Val Portule.

Here we found a few signallers, who stated that Divisional Headquarters was at Osteria de la Termini, five miles farther on, and the frontier post between Italy and Austria.

From Portule up to the frontier the road rises gradually, while the mountains on each side become less precipitous and the gorge widens. The extent of our victory became more and more apparent the farther we went. Streams of prisoners, dejected, sullen, and footsore, were making their way to the rear in parties varying in size from 300 to 10. Abandoned guns, transport, equipment, rifles, and stores of all sorts littered the sides of the road. There were many huts at intervals, some few of which were burning. At 9 A.M. we arrived at the Osteria, where we found the General, with Howard and one or two others, interviewing an Austrian General and some staff officers who had just arrived with a white flag.

We now heard that the advance had been success-



OSTERIA DEL TERMINE.



THE AUSTRIAN SURRENDER AT OSTERIA DEL TERMINE,
NOVEMBER 3, 1918.

fully resumed at 4.30. A certain amount of opposition was encountered at Vezzena and Bosson, but all resistance was overcome by 8 A.M., and a large force, estimated at fourteen battalions, including the IIIrd Corps commander and three divisional commanders, was surrounded and captured.

The 143rd Brigade was already moving down towards Caldonazzo.

The Austrian General, Von Ritter Romer, who had come in with a white flag, and was wounded in the thigh, protested to General Walker against the further advance of our troops, stating that an armistice had been signed at 3 A.M. on that morning. We had received no information to this effect, and General Romer was firmly but courteously informed that the advance must continue. As soon as the interview was finished General Walker sent Howard and an Intelligence Officer by car to the Headquarters of the Third Austro-Hungarian Army at Trent with the following terms:—

OSTERIA DEL TERMINE.

9.35 hours, 3rd November 1918.

1. In response to the Austrian Parlementaires, the G.O.C. 48th British Division states that the British forces have received no order to suspend hostilities, and that, in accordance with orders, he has given orders for his troops to occupy Levico, Pergine, and Trento. He demands the unconditional surrender of hostile troops in the above area, and an assurance that no action will be taken against the troops of the Entente.

2. He will hold General Romer as hostage whilst the occupation of the above area is carried out.
3. He demands that food be provided for all British troops in the above area.
4. He reserves to himself the right to take such steps as will ensure the control of the troops and civilians in the above area, and the prevention of the removal of enemy troops from the Austrian Front.

All the above terms were accepted, with the reservation that food could not be guaranteed, as the supply-trains had been pillaged by the deserting Austrian troops.

Divisional Headquarters remained at the Osteria for some hours. The situation for the G.O.C. was full of anxiety, as touch had been temporarily lost with the Italian Corps, the divisions on our right and left, and the Italian Sixth Army. At 10 A.M. the General ordered me to go on to Vezzena with Major Bucknall, A.P.M., to arrange the evacuation of the enormous quantity of prisoners collected there, who were reported to be rather truculent.

The road still rose gradually all the way to Vezzena, which is at the top of the pass. We passed the 145th Brigade Group on the way, rather foot-sore, but full of enthusiasm, and marching finely. About one and a half miles short of Vezzena the valley opens out into a grassy table-land, rather like Newmarket Heath in appearance. Turning the last corner of the road we came upon the most extraordinary sight imaginable. An open space of about 100 acres appeared to be absolutely packed

with humanity, moving aimlessly about like a swarm of ants. A closer view showed these to be Austrians, for the most part unarmed. Guarding this mob were the 7th Royal Warwicks, with pickets posted round at intervals and Lewis-guns ready trained in case of any trouble. Hall,¹ the C.O., was considerably perturbed as to what to do with his charges, and stated that the Austrian officers seemed to have lost all control over their men.

We set to work at once to divide all the officers from the men, and collected some 600 of the former into a separate enclosure. By means of N.C.O. interpreters the prisoners were then informed that there was no food for them nearer than Granezza, and that their only hope of avoiding starvation lay in marching back quietly under escort. This line of reasoning seemed to have the desired effect, and the work of evacuation was commenced in parties of 500 at a time, at twenty minutes' interval, each party in charge of ten British soldiers. Two companies of the 4th Oxforas were detailed for escort duties. The officers were retained till the end, and were allowed to ride or drive, there being many carts available. The Corps Commander and three Divisional Commanders were allowed to keep one staff officer, one A.D.C., and one servant each, and were placed in a hut with an officer's guard over them until the following morning. On the above lines the evacuation proceeded smoothly enough, and practically the whole of Vezzena was cleared by nightfall. Leaving Bucknall in charge of the evacuation I returned to Osteria del Termine. On

¹ Lieut.-Colonel P. A. Hall, D.S.O.

my way back I could see the advanced troops of the 20th Italian Division moving in extended order down the slopes of Mte. Campo. This was a welcome sight, as we had heard nothing of them since the previous afternoon. They were, of course, still some miles behind our leading troops, but they had had a much worse road and higher mountains to cross.

At the Osteria I found that signal communication with the Italian Sixth Army had at last been re-established, and a message received, confirming the action already taken by General Walker, ordering the advance to be pushed on relentlessly, and stating that no armistice had yet been signed.

This was all to the good, and the General decided that Divisional Headquarters should move to Vezzena at 4 P.M. As a matter of fact, at that moment it only consisted of the General, one A.D.C., the G. office senior clerk, myself, and six signallers.

Shortly after this there arrived the heavy artillery commander of the Italian Sixth Army, who wanted to put fourteen batteries of heavy artillery in motion up the Val d'Assa. With some difficulty he was persuaded to stay his hand. If he had had his way the whole road on which we depended for our supplies would have been hopelessly blocked, and our troops would literally have been without anything for forty-eight hours or more.

Meanwhile the 143rd Brigade Group had reached Caldonazzo at 12.30 P.M., and pushed on to Levico, which was occupied in the afternoon. Another 10,000 prisoners were collected in this locality. At 4.30 P.M. the General decided to go on to Cal-

donazzo to find out the situation for himself, and dropping me at Vezzena, ordered me to establish Divisional Headquarters there. The 5th Royal Sussex (Pioneer Battalion) arrived shortly afterwards, and Lieut.-Colonel Eberle, the officer commanding, was ordered to picquet the approaches to the camp. Vezzena had been the Headquarters of the IIIrd Austrian Corps. It was a spacious, finely-laid-out camp, containing over 200 excellent huts. There was also a large fort capable of accommodating two or three battalions. We had received information, however, from a prisoner that the fort had been mined, so it was given a wide berth and sentries posted round it. The whole locality was littered with booty; in fact it was quite difficult to prevent the men from loading themselves with all kinds of heavy trophies, which would have been impossible to carry far. There was much to be done, and we had a busy evening. Gradually other members of Divisional Headquarters turned up, including our servants with some rations. With unerring instinct they made straight for the Corps Commander's quarters, which they annexed for our use. There were several well-furnished rooms with real beds; an ante-room containing armchairs, card-tables, &c.; and a dining-room complete with table-linen, cutlery, glass, &c. Auto-graphed photographs of the Emperor Charles and the Empress Zita adorned the walls.

After seeing that the camp was properly picquetted, allotting huts to the various units, and arranging for the reception and dispatch of prisoner stragglers who kept still arriving, I went round to

see the four Austrian Generals who had been allotted one large block of huts and placed under an officer's guard. I found them depressed but resigned. They had their personal kits and sufficient food, and made no complaints. At 10 P.M. we sat down, hungry, tired, and extremely cheerful, to an excellent meal. Despite the amount of booty lying about at Vezzena there were practically no eatables left. I think all our servants found was one large bag of sugar and two huge crates of signallers' carrier-pigeons, which of course were quickly killed and stewed, and formed the *pièce de résistance* of our meal. A message was received at 10.30 to say that the G.O.C. could not get back, and that he was sleeping at Caldonazzo. The 144th and 145th Brigade Groups were at Caldonazzo; the 143rd had occupied Levico.

The advance was to be resumed on the following day at 10 A.M., the 143rd Brigade moving to Baselga di Pine, the 144th and 145th Brigades to an area north of Pergine. Divisional Headquarters were to be established at Civezzano. At 3 A.M. on 4th November I was awakened by an orderly with the following message:—

Urgent Priority

G.C. 14. 4.

Armistice with Austria-Hungary has been signed on 3rd November. Armistice will come into effect from 15.00 hours on 4th November. Moves ordered for 4th November will take place, but all troops will halt on the line gained at 15.00 hours exactly. All Austrians within the line gained this hour will be considered as prisoners of war. Austrians not

within this line will at 15.00 hours retire for a distance of at least three kilometres. The utmost care will be taken to see that these instructions are carried out. The contents of this wire will be immediately passed to all units who are in touch in case they should not receive them by other methods. Brigades will report as early as possible after 15.00, 4th November, the exact lines they have reached. Acknowledge. *Addressed* all concerned.

48TH DIVISION.

So this was really the official end of Austria as a participant in the world war.

Looking back at the situation on 30th October, it seemed almost inconceivable that in the short space of five days the mighty Austro-Hungarian Empire had ceased to count as a military power. The completeness of the disaster which had overtaken her, and the rapidity of her disintegration, had never been equalled in history, and in all probability never will be. But one was too tired to philosophise, and after seeing that the message was passed on to every one concerned I put in another two hours' sleep.

CHAPTER VIII.

AFTER THE ARMISTICE.

ALTHOUGH the war on our front was officially over, I do not think that any one felt any particular elation or relief for the moment. There were too many pressing problems requiring immediate attention, and from a "Q." point of view the Division was in a somewhat perilous position.

So far the supply system had worked all right, but it must be borne in mind that the farthest troops were now over seventy-six miles from rail-head. The graph facing page 124 shows the distances and gradients which had to be traversed.

By this time, however, owing to the exertions of Major E. K. Harley, D.S.O., British Liaison Officer at the Headquarters of the Sixth Italian Army, some forty Italian Fiat lorries had been definitely placed at our disposal at Granezza to work forward from there.

On 3rd November orders were issued stating that lorry-head on 4th November would be Valle di Portule, and supply details were moved forward there from Asiago. During the night of the 3rd-4th, however, it was realised that the troops were so far forward that it became necessary to assist

the 1st Line Transport by getting rations for consumption on the 5th to Caldonazzo by lorry.

Accordingly, orders were given for fifteen British Fiat lorries to be loaded up at Portule, and pushed right forward to Caldonazzo on the 4th. This gave us one more day, and I postponed making further arrangements until I could see for myself the state of the road from Vezzena down into the Trentino, and could find out whether there were any captured stores of which it would be possible to make use.

We breakfasted at 6 A.M. on the 4th, and as we were doing so I got a message from the officer who was in charge of the Austrian Generals and their staffs asking if I would go over at once, as they were inclined to be truculent, and were refusing to be sent back as prisoners of war. On arriving at their hut I requested them all to come outside, where I read them the armistice conditions. The Generals listened in gloomy silence. Some of the younger staff officers, however, interposed with violent exclamations, such as "Schweinhunde." After reading the terms I said: "Gentlemen, it is no use protesting or kicking against the fortunes of war. My orders are to send you back immediately to the Sixth Army Headquarters at Breganze. Three cars will be ready for you in half an hour. A British officer will go in charge of each car. You will save us all a lot of trouble if you will accept the inevitable and go quietly."

At this there were more mutterings and sour looks. Then one of the Generals came forward, and through an interpreter said: "Colonel, we are ready

to go without any more fuss. I wish to apologise for the remarks and behaviour of some of our younger officers, but you must remember that this is a very bitter moment for us, and they have been carried away by their feelings. I also wish to thank you for the courteous way in which we have been treated."

We mutually saluted, and there the matter ended.

The Pioneer Battalion had orders to remain at Vezzena for the present, and before starting off I had a walk round with Eberle,¹ the C.O., and discussed with him the best methods of collecting and, as far as possible, guarding the enormous amount of war-material which was scattered about in every direction. The more one looked the more one saw. There were about 15,000 rifles, hundreds of machine-guns, dumps of shells and S.A.A., carts, lorries, motor-cars, saddlery, range-finders, field-glasses, furniture; in fact all the natural appendages of an army in the field except clothing and food. I never knew why there was no clothing, but the absence of rations was accounted for by the fact that the Austrian supply arrangements had completely broken down since the first of the month, and everything in reserve had therefore been consumed. The only thing we found of any practical use was a small store of about 10,000 lb. of oats.

At about 7.30 I started in a car with Hales (G.S.O.3) to go to Civezzano, where Divisional Headquarters were to concentrate. The road was all right as far as Lavarone, and on the way there we

¹ Lieut.-Colonel G. S. Eberle, D.S.O.

passed quantities of abandoned guns and a good many more straggling prisoners coming in. From Lavarone down to Caldonazzo the road drops nearly 3000 feet in under five miles. It is a narrow one-way mountain road, with about twenty-five hairpin corners, no guard rails, and a precipice on one side all the way. The passing-places were few and far between, and altogether the route was far worse than anything we had come across before, and decidedly dangerous for lorries or 1st Line Transport.

After proceeding about a mile we came upon two British 6-inch howitzers, drawn by enormous tractors, trying to get down, and of course blocking all transport and everything else.

As the C.R.A. had informed me the previous evening that he had given orders that these two guns were not to proceed beyond Lavarone, I knew that the subaltern in charge had either mistaken his position or was pushing on contrary to orders, and as it took these guns at least half an hour to get round one hairpin turn, the prospects of any rations reaching the troops that night seemed rather remote. Hales and I got out, and after some trouble found two places where the road was just wide enough to allow the guns to be squeezed into the side and other vehicles to get past them. I explained the situation to the officer in charge, gave him a written order not to move forward, and told him I would inform the C.R.A. as soon as possible. We then went on to Caldonazzo, arriving about 11 A.M.

The confusion at this place, which is only a dirty little straggling village with narrow streets, was indescribable. There were at least 10,000 more

prisoners collected in the village, and more coming in every moment. The 4th Oxforas had been put in charge of them. Bartlett,¹ the C.O., was trying to arrange order out of chaos, but had his style cramped by the simultaneous arrival of two Italian divisions, the 20th and another, who marched in by three different roads, and proceeded to annex every building in the town, and to block all the streets completely with their transport. With some difficulty we pushed our way through to the Market Square, where the headquarters of the 20th Italian Division had established itself in the open. Fortunately I knew some of the staff, so with a little difficulty I persuaded them to take over the prisoners from Bartlett, and to arrange for their feeding and evacuation. We then proceeded on to Pergine, the road running along the western shore of the beautiful Lago di Caldonazzo. We passed most of the 144th and 145th Brigade Groups on the way. The men looked rather tired, dirty, and unshaven, but in the highest spirits, and marching astoundingly well.

The whole countryside was littered with abandoned stores, guns, burnt aeroplanes, dead horses, and small groups of Austrian stragglers. Beyond Pergine on the road to Trent the road was blocked for miles with the abandoned transport of three army corps, which had had their retreat cut off when attempting to get away through the bottle-necked defile leading to Trent. This was a disgusting sight. There were thousands of vehicles of every type and description, some loaded, some with their

¹ Lieut.-Colonel A. J. N. Bartlett, D.S.O.

loads pulled off and scattered on the road. In many cases the ponies or horses were lying dead still harnessed. Many of these had been hacked up for meat by the retreating and starving Austrians, and there were great pools of blood and entrails every fifty yards or so. Other of the animals were still standing alive, but almost starving. The local inhabitants were engaged on looting these and any of the scattered stores they fancied. A certain number of the best vehicles and ponies were commandeered by our own advanced troops, to supplement their exhausted 1st Line Transport. It was at least a fortnight before this road was finally cleared and all the débris collected at Trent.

Turning northwards four miles west of Perghine, we reached Civezzano, a comparatively clean little village with some quite good buildings. Here we found General Walker with Howard and Huntington. We established Divisional Headquarters in the Municipio, and set to work to find the billeting accommodation in this place and the surrounding villages.

The Austrian staff officers who had come in with a white flag at Termini on the previous day were still with us. General Von Ritter Romer had been sent to hospital. It was rather difficult to know what to do with these gentlemen. They had no kit and nothing to eat. So we shared a rather scanty lunch of bully beef with them, for which they were extremely grateful, and that evening we received permission to let them go over the Armistice line.

We went round the various brigades in the after-

noon, and tried to help them in finding billets, which was no easy task. The villages in this district are wretchedly poor, and have hardly any decent houses. We were not allowed to use either Perghine or Levico, consequently it was very difficult to get all the men under cover, and this proved to be the worst billeting area we had during the whole of our service in Italy. The local inhabitants seemed very glad to see us, shouting "Viva Gl'Inglesi" whenever any British appeared, while flags and bits of coloured cloth were hung out of nearly every window. From what I heard afterwards, however, I am inclined to think that if the boot had been on the other leg and the Austrians had just wrested this district from the Allies, the local protestations of welcome would have been the same. The truth is that these wretchedly poor peasants, living in a disputed boundary territory, usually give their adherence to whoever is top dog at the moment. They are too servile and frightened to do anything else.

At 5 P.M. I motored back to Caldonazzo to see if any transport or rations had arrived, and as it had not I spent some time going round the place with Bartlett. The railhead of the Third Austrian Army was here, hence the quantity and value of the accumulated stores was prodigious.

There were between 200 and 300 guns of all calibres, from a 17-inch howitzer down to light field-guns. These had all been prepared for blowing up with a slab of gun-cotton at each breach and muzzle, and each connected to the next by fuse. We walked warily round these, and cut as much

fuse as possible. In the ordnance sheds, which covered acres of ground, were more than 5000 machine-guns, over a million rifles, swords, bayonets, range-finders, engines, equipment of every kind, clothing, tents, &c. Three loaded trains stood in the station. In one of these were two trucks full of magnificent Zeiss glasses. I think that every man of the Oxfords and a good many other British soldiers who passed through Caldonazzo on that day helped themselves to a pair of these !

Then there were huge parks of transport of every description, from 4-ton lorries to pony carts, and a fair supply of oats and straw, sufficient, I reckoned, to supply the Division for a week or ten days. This was a great relief to me, as it meant an enormous saving of transport. Of food we could find nothing except a moderate amount of flour and a quantity of barrels containing a putrified mixture of apparently rotten sardines or pilchards. These stank horribly when opened, but they were evidently part of the staple Austrian ration, and we discovered some of the local peasants greedily eating the contents with their fingers. There was also a considerable area which had been cultivated for vegetables, and a good supply of growing cabbages. It was manifestly impossible to guard everything, and Bartlett only had sufficient men at his disposal to put sentries on the railway-station and the food and ration stores.

By 18.30, as the ration lorries and some of the 1st Line Transport had still not arrived from Vezzena, I began to get a bit anxious, and started up the mountain road to meet them. After two or three

miles I met three lorries, the drivers of which told me that the remainder were stuck behind these two infernal guns which I had ordered not to move in the morning. Going on farther I found these negotiating the last hairpin. I had great pleasure in telling the officer in charge exactly what I thought of him, and once more I got the guns to a wide part of the road, where the lorries could pass. Then I went back to Caldonazzo, warned the supply details and 1st Line Transport of the delay to the ration lorries, and started back to Civezzano.

The Italian troops by this time had left Caldonazzo for Trent, leaving behind only an escort for the Austrian prisoners. The drive back was quite exciting. There were stragglers of every description.

I found a few of our own men, and was able to direct them to their units. There were many Italian soldiers who had fallen out, unable to keep up with the long march. These I told to report themselves to the officer in charge of the prisoners' guard at Caldonazzo. But the biggest problem was the rag-tag and bobtail of the Austrian Army. There were hundreds of these about, mostly armed, desperate-looking ruffians, who looked as if they would murder any one for something to eat. Luckily I had picked up a man of the Warwicks who could speak a little German, and with his help we were able to order most of those we saw to Caldonazzo.

Some one had set fire to Perghine during the evening. It was blazing merrily as we passed through it, and lighting up the whole countryside.

Arriving back at Civezzano at 9 P.M. I found all

Divisional Headquarters assembled, and an excellent dinner in progress.

Hall and Abbot of the 7th Royal Warwicks dined with us. Huntington had produced, from goodness knows where, two or three bottles of champagne, while the cook had discovered still more carrier-pigeons. It was a most cheery meal.

That night I got an excellent bed in the Curé's house, with real sheets. At midnight McTurk¹ arrived to say that all the rations had arrived at Caldonazzo by 11 P.M.

Getting up at 5 A.M. the next morning I went to Caldonazzo again, and found the rations had been cleared, and that the supply details had taken over the local stores of forage.

Then I went to Levico, where I found quite a lot of our 1st Line Transport which had got lost. After explaining to these detachments where they could draw rations and the locality of their units, I returned to Civezzano, where we spent the morning arranging details of supply, billeting, &c., and also a scheme for salvaging the area.

H.R.H. the Duke of Braganza lunched with us. He had been in command of the Sixth Austrian Cavalry Division, and had surrendered to General Walker on the evening of 3rd November, saying as he handed over his sword, "I am indeed proud, General, to be able to surrender to such a distinguished British officer as yourself, and permit me to congratulate you on the wonderful marching powers of your magnificent division. The advance of the 48th British Division will go down to history

¹ Major A. G. McTurk, M.C., D.A.Q.M.G., 48th Division.

as one of the most splendid feats of the British Army." For an example of a really tactful speech under awkward circumstances this can hardly be equalled. From that moment the Duke was a *persona grata*. He was sent back to General Diaz in a car, and I presume he got on the best of terms with the Italian C.-in-C. by the aid of similar diplomacy.

At any rate he was sent back to us on the 5th with a written order, stating that he was to be passed through the Armistice line and set free.

He was a fine old man, seventy-two years of age, but as hard and active as most men of thirty. He was most interesting at lunch as to the causes of the war. He was emphatic in his declaration that the one man of all others in Europe who had been most to blame was Count Tisza. He was rather pathetic when he left. He said, "Well, gentlemen, I thank you most sincerely for all your hospitality and kindness. We don't know what we are going back to. We only know one thing for certain, which is, that our Empire of Austria has ceased to exist."

I must say that we all fully expected that he would be murdered within a few days, but I believe he lived for some time, and died of pneumonia quite recently.

In the afternoon I went with Eastburn, the Intelligence Officer, round the area on an expedition for rounding up prisoners. We found several hundreds, including several complete artillery batteries with their horses and guns. Most of them seemed utterly apathetic and disinclined to move, so we

gave out that any prisoners found outside the cage at Caldonazzo after dark would be shot. This had the desired effect of getting a move on them.

Bartlett told me at Caldonazzo that the prisoners were in a very bad way, so we got leave from the Italian subaltern in charge to go through the cage. It was absolutely crammed, perfectly filthy, and the prisoners had had no rations.

The Italian officer in charge of the guard seemed rather helpless, so we decided to organise the business ourselves. Firstly, we arranged for all the officers to be moved to a different place. Secondly, parties were to be allowed out under escort to pick vegetables for themselves. Thirdly, we got out a scheme for dividing the camp up into areas with an Austrian sergeant-major in charge of each, so that the rations could be properly distributed when they did arrive. We left the place with some sort of organisation, but I could see that there would be serious trouble unless rations arrived fairly soon.

The Italian sentries were not helping matters by holding bits of biscuit through the wire-fence and then snatching them away again.

Just as we were coming away a nasty incident happened which nearly had a disastrous ending.

A party of about 2000 more prisoners were being brought in from Perghine aerodrome under British escort with their own transport. On arriving at the cage the prisoners quite naturally wanted to take their belongings off the transport. The Italian officer refused to allow this, whereupon some of them rushed at the transport to pull off their kits

and blankets. The Italian officer immediately lost his head, and started firing off his revolver in various directions. The prisoners both inside and outside then made a rush at him, and would, I think, have killed him if we had not been there. As it was, we were able to stop them, and the whole thing ended quietly. That evening I went to Perghine, and reported the whole circumstances to the Italian Corps Headquarters. They promised to send down rations immediately, and to commence evacuating the prisoners on the following day. Both these promises were kept.

By this time our supply system had evolved itself as follows. From rail-head, which was still Villa Verla, supplies were taken to Granezza, eighteen miles, by 3-ton lorries of the Divisional Supply Column. At this point they were transferred on to Italian lorries and taken to Osteria del Termini, another eighteen miles. Here a depot was formed, and placed in charge of a Brigade Supply Officer and his details.

Thence a fleet of twenty-seven British 30-cwt. Fiats took the supplies on to Caldonazzo. This number was found sufficient, owing to the fact that Austrian forage was available at the latter place. Of these twenty-seven lorries, four were placed at the disposal of the 143rd Brigade Group at Baselga di Pine, which was too far for 1st Line Transport to function. The remainder of the Division drew with 1st Line Transport from the dump at Caldonazzo, where two Brigade Supply Officers with their details were stationed. The difficulties of the road from Vezzena to Caldonazzo have already been told,

and too much credit cannot be given to the drivers of the twenty-seven forward lorries who performed this dangerous journey to and fro for four days without a single mishap. On the 7th a longer but much safer road was discovered *via* Carbonare. It is a matter of congratulation to all concerned that during the whole period of the advance, and until all troops had been withdrawn from the plateau, there were only two days on which the troops had to subsist on preserved rations. On every other day full fresh rations, including green vegetables, were forthcoming, and were issued to the troops. To any one seeing the road for the first time and noticing the distances and gradients, the continuance of supplies without some breakdown would appear almost impossible. That things went so well was due to the excellent co-operation existing between Divisional Headquarters, the Divisional R.A.S.C., and the O.C. 48th M.T. Company; the initiative displayed by Lieut.-Colonel Roberts, O.C. 48th Divisional train, Major Inskip, the S.S.O., and Major Boyd, commanding the 48th M.T. Company; the efficiency of the lorries of the M.T. Company, which had been maintained in excellent repair; the ability of the drivers, especially those responsible for doing the last stage; and finally, to the holding off of the snow and continuance of fine weather.

Had snow fallen, and it was long overdue, during the advance or while the Division remained in the Trentino, we must inevitably have been cut off from our supplies.

November the 6th and 7th were spent in collect-

ing prisoners and making some attempt to salvage the area.

On the morning of the 6th one of our salvaging parties discovered an Austrian Red Cross train in a cutting about half-way between Caldonazzo and Trent. The enemy had evidently tried to get this train away at the last moment, and as all traffic was disorganised by them it had met with disaster.

The three leading coaches were telescoped, and the remainder of the train was full of Austrian stretcher cases, some eighty badly wounded.

Three doctors and two nurses were in charge. They were nearly starving when discovered, and it was a difficult task getting all the wounded away, as they had to be carried over three-quarters of a mile to the nearest point to which vehicles could be driven. Eventually, however, all the wounded were safely placed in the temporary hospital we had established at Caldonazzo.

The telescoped portion of the train was full of dead bodies, but with the limited means at our disposal it was impossible to move them.

On the 7th I went into Trent, which is a fine well-built town, the most interesting feature being the huge statue of Dante in the chief square. The place was packed with Italian troops, while many of the streets and all the approaches were littered with the abandoned transport and impedimenta of the Austrian Army. The road from Pergine into Trent is a fine feat of engineering, running along the side of a steep gorge, and being in several places tunnelled out of the solid rock. The last three miles

of this road into Trent were almost impassable. Here the transport of the retreating armies had collected and jammed itself. The route was strewn with rifles, equipment, clothing, cooking - pots, machine-guns, ammunition, and every sort of débris. There were vehicles of all kinds, some with wheels off, some intact. But the worst part of the whole spectacle were the dead, dying, and starving horses and ponies. Some of these had been killed and hacked to pieces for meat; others had died of exhaustion; others again were in the last stage of starvation. We put a good many wretched beasts out of their misery that afternoon with our revolvers, and I am sorry to say ran out of ammunition before we had finished, but on the following day regular parties were detailed to clear the road and destroy all useless animals.

On the 7th a new road for our supplies from Vezzena was discovered *viâ* Centa and Vigolo, and though this was about five kilometres longer the gradients were comparatively safe, and our lorries were able to make the descent to Caldonazzo with less risk.

On this day also we were warned that we should shortly be sent back to Granezza and thence to the plains, which news was most thankfully received by any one who had anything to do with the supply of the Division.

On the evening of the 7th the General, Howard, and myself dined with General Penella and the Corps staff at Perghine. This was a great ceremonial function, finishing up by the Italian National Anthem and God save the King being played many

times over by three violinists. The evening was rather spoilt for Howard and myself by the Italian staff officer in control of movements, who informed us in the middle of dinner that we were to move back to Italy *via* the Val Sugana. As the whole of our supply system came through the Val d'Assa this would have been an almost impossible task. We argued till 1 A.M. in vain, and eventually Howard had to motor on the 8th to the Army Headquarters at Breganze in order to obtain permission for us to go back the same way as we had come. The gradual moving back of the Division into the Granezza area was completed by 10th November. Here there was still much clearing up to be done, though the details left behind under Murray¹ had done splendid work during the time the rest of the Division had been away. News of the Armistice with Germany was received at noon on the 11th without very much excitement.

On the 13th, 14th, and 15th the Division moved down to the plains to an area north of Trissino, with Headquarters at Valdagno. The area allotted to us was really too small for the comfortable accommodation of the Division, and there was a certain amount of legitimate grouching at the billets at first.

After a few days, however, we were permitted to include some extra villages, and all units were housed in comparative comfort. Now that active operations were at an end, the Division applied itself with zest to the repair of damage and a general tidying up. Spit and polish became the vogue, and on the 27th certain units of two Divisions had

¹ Major P. M. Murray, M.C., D.A.A.G., 48th Division.

the opportunity of showing how they could turn themselves out at a great review of the Allied forces by H.M. the King of Italy, held at Trissino. That all concerned acquitted themselves well is shown in the congratulatory messages received (Appendix).

During the remainder of November and December the time was occupied in drill, ceremonial parades, and games. An enormous number of football and hockey competitions were started, together with mounted paper-chases for officers. A certain amount of pivotal men began to trickle away on demobilisation, but the bulk of the Division was still present at Christmas, when all units vied with each other in providing really sumptuous Christmas dinners. Demobilisation was accelerated in January, and was practically completed by the middle of March, two infantry units only being retained as part of the army of occupation—viz., the 1/5 Royal Warwicks and the 1/6 Gloucesters. These units were brought up to strength by volunteers from other battalions, augmented by men who had not enlisted until 1916. On 26th March the Divisional Headquarters cadre left Tavernelle, and that date marks the official end of the 48th Division in the great European war.

On the whole, the Division had had a prosperous and happy time in Italy, and there are very few officers and men who will not recall the seventeen months spent in the country with feelings of satisfaction: we had learnt a lot about our Italian allies, and they had learnt a lot about us. Many individual friendships had been made, and I feel I am not overstating the case when I assert that

any member of the 48th Division will always receive a warm welcome from the natives if he ever revisits the districts in which the 48th Division served, and that in turn any Italian who knew the 48th Division in Italy will receive an equally warm welcome if he pays a visit to England.

So the 26th March 1919 marked the passing of the 48th South Midland Division from their part in the Great War. The Division, however, still lives, and at the present time (1922) is over 9000 strong. That it will continue to live, to keep up its great traditions, and to be ready at any time to play its part once more for the Empire in a time of emergency, is a certainty which no one who ever served with it can doubt. In taking leave of it, let us wish it successes in the future equal to those in the past, and let us feel proud that we served in it.

APPENDIX.

SOME OPERATION ORDERS AND CON- GRATULATORY MESSAGES.

48th Division.

02.50.

French report area up to COVOLA N.—ECK evacuated. Div. will capture line CROCE S. ANTONIO MOSCHIA to-day. French are attacking M. LONGARA. 144 and 145 Bdes. will each attack with 2 Bns. Right Boundary—West edge of GALLIO WOOD, along C. GIARDINI—S. ANTONIO Road inclusive. Other boundaries as on map given to-day. Art. bombardment commences 05.00 hours, at same time as French. Barrage on WINTERSTELLUNG 05.45 to 05.50. M. CATZ—M. RASTA 05.50 to 06.35. Blue Objectives 06.35 to 07.35. Red Line 07.35 to 09.35. Infantry to get in at last named hours in each case. Support Bns. to move up to Outpost Line of Resistance. But are at disposal of Bdes. for operation. Reserve Bde. to be ready to move one hour's notice after 06.00. 8 M.G.'s from defence allotted each Bde., to be replaced from Coys. in Reserve, moving off at 08.00. Div. H.Q. remain at GRANEZZA.

(Sgd.) H. C. HOWARD, LT.-COL.,
Gen. Staff.

1.11.1918.

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Secret.

Copy No.

48TH DIVISION ORDER No. 55.

2nd November 1918.

Ref. Map 'A'—1/100,000 (attached).

'B'—1/25,000 (to Bdes. only).

1. (a) The Fourth Italian Army has reached GRIGNO, and is pushing up the VAL SUGANA.

(b) The 20th Italian Div. is moving up ERIO.

2. The enemy must be given no rest, and the Division will advance along road marked on Map 'A' with a view to reaching CALDONAZZO and cutting off the whole of the ALTIPIANO.

ADVANCED GUARD.

Comdr.—Brig.-Gen. SLADEN.

143rd Bde.

1 Sec. 18 prs.

1 Sec. 4.5" Hows.

$\frac{1}{2}$ Co. R.E.

1 Sec. 60 prs. (if road permits).

3. (a) The Advanced Guard, as per margin, will advance to-day as far as PORRECHE D'AVANTI.

(b) Should the Adv. Guard Commander consider it feasible, he will continue his advance beyond PORRECHE D'AVANTI in the direction of VEZZENA.

4. The main body will consist of 144th and 145th Bdes., and 2 Brigades R.F.A. (with half number of guns).

Order of march for main body will be issued later.

5. (a) 144th Bde. (less 1 Bn.) will concentrate in the most forward position in the ASSA S. of the VAL DI PORTULE road junction, so as to avoid marching any troops back.

(b) 145th Bde. (less Bn. on M. MEATTA road) will concentrate in the VAL DI PORTULE as early as possible, and be ready to move off up the ASSA road.

(c) R.E. and Pioneers will be ready to move in rear of main body, and will not return to present billets after to-day's work.

6. A.A. and Q.M.G. will issue all orders to Administrative departments and transport.

7. Reports to CAMPOROVERE after 12 noon.

8. ACKNOWLEDGE.

Issued at 09.45.

H. C. HOWARD, LIEUT.-COLONEL,
General Staff.

*Secret.*48th Division.
No. S/661/4.ADMINISTRATIVE INSTRUCTIONS
to accompany 48th Division Order No. 55.

1. Lorry-head to-morrow at ASIAGO.

1st Line Transport will draw rations from Dumps there at H. 70-65 at following hours to-morrow :—

143 Bde.	.	.	.	.	08.00 hours.
144 Bde.	.	.	.	.	08.30 „
145 Bde.	.	.	.	.	09.00 „
Div. Troops	.	.	.	.	09.30 „

2. Drinking water Point now at S.M. MADDALENA, and will be moved to VESCOVI early to-morrow.
3. Divisional Ammunition Dump is at H. 70-60.
4. Any dead should if possible be taken to ASIAGO Cemetery H. 65-65.
5. First Line transport will be parked N. of ASIAGO.
Col. Sir H. WAECHTER will assume duties of Town Major, ASIAGO, forthwith, and will allot group areas for First Line transport.
6. Divisional Soup Kitchen will be in ASIAGO to-night, and it is hoped to send Canteen Stores forward to the Dump to-night.
7. All animals should have one horse-rug with them, to be carried "En Banderolle" round the neck when on the move.

2/11/1918.

G. H. BARNETT, LIEUT.-COLONEL,
A.A. & Q.M.G., 48th Division.

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48TH DIVISION ORDER No. 56.

2nd November 1918.

1. (a) The advanced guard has reached the approximate line VEZZENA—OST. DEL TERMINE to-day.
 (b) Touch has not been obtained with 20th Italian Division since VERENA was passed.
 (c) No touch has been obtained with Italian Column on right to-day.
2. (a) The enemy resistance has been weak, and there is every sign of a very rapid retreat.
 (b) Prisoners report that enemy intends to hold the ROVERE line, or the VAL SUGANA positions.
3. The Div. will continue its advance to-morrow, and gain, as early as possible, the high ground overlooking the VAL SUGANA. If this is successful, CALDONAZZO and LEVICO will be captured, and the VAL SUGANA blocked.

4. ORDER OF MARCH.

ADVANCED GUARD.

Comdr.—B.-Gen. SLADEN.

143rd Bde.

1 M.G. Co.

241 Bde. R.F.A.

1 Sec. 6th Hows.

$\frac{1}{2}$ Co. R.E.

(a) Advanced guard as per margin.
 Hour of start at discretion of G.O.C.

(b) Main Body in order of march—
 144th Bde.—to clear VAL PORTULE junction by 09.00.

145th Bde.—head to pass VAL PORTULE junction at 04.30.

240 Bde. R.F.A.—to follow 145th Bde.

2 Batt. H. A. (Italian)	} follow in rear of main body as they reach VAL PORT- ULE.
M.G. Bn. (less 3 Cos.)	
5th R. Sussex R.	
R.E. (less $\frac{1}{2}$ Co.)	

5. Reports to VAL PORTULE junction until further orders.

6. ACKNOWLEDGE.

Issued at 18.00 hrs.

(Sd.) H. C. HOWARD, LT.-COL.,
 General Staff, 48th Division.

G.A. 16.

48th (Adv.) Div. H.Q.
03.15.

If LEVICO and CALDONAZZO are captured, 143rd Bde. will send patrols towards BUSAGRANDE and SELVOT, but if strongly held by enemy no attack will be launched until A. G. Commander has seen Div. Commander. Right Column has reached BOCHETTA DI PORTULE. 20th Italian Div. BOSCO DI POSELARO in Sq. B. 52 and VALLE DEL TRUGHELE B. 62 with patrols further. In to-day's attack of LEVICO there will be no troops between 48th Div. and 4th Italian Army advancing up the BRENTA, so Right Flank must be watched.

(Sd.) H. C. HOWARD, LT.-COL.

3.11.1918.

48TH DIVISION.

ORDER OF THE DAY.

Officers, N.C.O.'s, and men of the 48th Division—

Your achievements during the last few days of the most profound military events deserve unstinted praise. After 14 weeks of trench warfare and arduous work, chiefly at night, combined with frequent raids of the most difficult though successful nature, you have undertaken an attack on a front originally allotted to two Divisions against what ought to have been impregnable mountain positions; you have swept away the enemy rearguards, and, acting as the vanguard of the Sixth Italian Army, you have advanced so rapidly and with such resolution that the retiring enemy have had no time to reform, and have left over 20,000 prisoners, hundreds of guns, and immeasurable booty in the hands of the Division.

The mere performance of the march in the time and under the conditions you endured would have been even without opposition considered a creditable feat. You can justly claim that the favourable situation of the Italian Armies on this front at 15.00 hrs. to-day, when one of the most memorable armistices in history was signed, is largely due to your exertions and resolution.

As your Divisional Commander I cordially thank you.

H. B. WALKER, MAJOR-GENERAL,
Commanding 48th Division.

4th Novr. 1918.

158 THE 48TH DIVISION IN ITALY

TRANSLATION.

XII. Corps.
No. 5792.

Novr. 5th 1918.

ORDER OF THE DAY.

Officers and men !

In three days of hard fighting, the 48th British Division, and the 20th Italian Division, joined by the same ideal, by the same heroism, broke every enemy resistance ; and by conquering, one M. MOSCIAGH, the other the ASSA defences, have gloriously opened the way to the goal that history and right shewed us.

You did not count your efforts, the distance to cover, nor the formidable defences of the enemy.

The freeing of a great part of the TRENTINO, the thousands of guns captured, the innumerable prisoners are there to show the greatness of your victory.

The pride which shines in your eyes, and the satisfaction of accomplished duty, are a prize for the sacrifices you have suffered.

But I want to express to you my personal admiration and gratitude, I, who have followed you in these days, so great for our country.

Long live the 48th Division ! Long live the 20th Italian Division ! Long live the great British Nation ! Long live Italy.

(Sd.) G. PENNELLA, LIEUT.-GENL.,
Commanding Army Corps.

48th Division.

G. 54.

The following message has been received from General F. R. Earl of CAVAN, K.P., K.C.B., M.V.O., Commanding-in-Chief British Force in ITALY :—

“ I have been waiting to hear from 6th Army Commander outlines of your great victory. I have also been waiting for the definite order for your concentration with the XIV. Corps. To-day I have received both, and I hasten to send to all ranks my intense appreciation of their great services and my sincere thanks to you personally for the drive and determination with which you conducted your arduous operations. The C.I.G.S. sent his special congratulations to the 48th Division to-day by King's Messenger. British Troops may well be proud of their actions in Mountains and in Plains, but the pride I feel in them exceeds all.”

The following reply has been sent by Major-General Sir H. B. WALKER, K.C.B., D.S.O. :—

“ Many thanks for kind message, which is being communicated to all ranks. All ranks will be proud to receive such an appreciation from their C-in-C.”

(Sd.) J. B. HALES, CAPT.,
for Lieut.-Colonel,
General Staff, 48th Division.

8th Nov. 1918.

*From Colonel RAGIONI, Italian General Mission,
TREVISO, to G.O.C. 48th Division.*

“ To the glorious 48th Division, representative of the British flag in TRENT, I send my best congratulations.”

From G.O.C. 48th Division to Colonel RAGIONI.

“ Very many thanks for your kind message of congratulation, which is being communicated to the troops, and is greatly appreciated by all ranks.”

160 THE 48TH DIVISION IN ITALY

Issued with D.R.O. 779.

48th Division.
No. A/1699.

The following letter has been received :—

“ A.A. & Q.M.G., 48th Division.

“ Since the month of May, I have been investigating claims against all the Divisions that are or have been out here. It is very often the seamy side of things which comes my way. I would like to say that in no instance of any claim against the 48th Division has there ever been one of wilful damage, looting, or intimidation, and that as regards the FARA Area, where the Camps were very ill-chosen, the enormous bill for damages is not the fault of the 48th Division.

“ Wherever they have been, the country people speak of them in the highest possible terms, and I have not had a single claim against the Division for theft of grapes during the vintage. Considering that it was a reserve Divisional Area, with small and scattered Camps hidden away up bye-roads and in vineyards, very often with only a N.C.O. in charge, it says a great deal for the men.

“ I hope you will not think this an impertinence on my part.

9/11/18.

(Sgd.) A. WATERFIELD, CAPT.”

“ The G.O.C. is particularly gratified at this testimonial to the good behaviour of the Division, and he wishes his thanks and appreciation to be conveyed to the men.

“ He feels sure that as long as the Division remains in ITALY or in any other Allied or occupied territory, the high standard in this respect which has obtained in the past will be maintained by the Division.

11/11/18.

(Sgd.) G. H. BARNETT, LIEUT.-COLONEL,
A.A. & Q.M.G., 48th Division.”

48th Div.

A. 1729.

I desire to express my gratification at the very excellent manner in which the troops representative of the 48th Division marched past to-day in the review by His Majesty the KING OF ITALY, and the smart appearance of men, horses, and vehicles.

'A' Battery, 241 Bde. R.F.A., marched past well, and their teams and guns were very clean and smartly turned out.

The composite Infantry Brigade of 1/6th R. War. R., 1/7th Worc. R., and 1/4th R. Berks. R., commanded by Brig.-Genl. H. R. DONE, D.S.O., would compare favourably as regards smartness, regularity in the march past, and general physique, with any other Brigade in any theatre of war.

The 475th Fd. Co. R.E. and the composite Company of the Battalion of the M.G. Corps were a credit to their respective Units, and the Train wagons and teams were beautifully turned out.

Everything pointed to great care and zeal on the part of all concerned in preparation, and I fully realise the amount of labour and time spent by Officers and Other Ranks under by no means advantageous conditions.

It speaks much for the Esprit de Corps and the soldierly spirit pervading all Units of this Division that, after so many years of war, every one should have 'played the game' so well, and I request that my thanks and appreciation may be fully promulgated.

27th November 1918.

H. B. WALKER, MAJOR-GENERAL,
Commanding 48th Division.

L

48th Division.
No. A. 1729.

The following messages received in connection with the review by His Majesty the King of Italy are published for information :—

“ Please convey my best congratulations and thanks to all ranks taking part in to-day’s parade on their particularly smart turnout and soldierly bearing.

GENERAL BABINGTON.”

Following message received from G.H.Q. begins : “ His Majesty the King of Italy was graciously pleased to express his delight at the parade to-day, and the real pleasure it gave him to see the British troops. The Commander-in-Chief was extremely pleased with the parade. All ranks deserve the highest praise for their turnout, steadiness, and march past. He considers that no better War Review has ever been held, and sincerely thanks all Staffs, Officers, Warrant Officers, N.C.O.’s and men for their efforts.” ends.

28-11-18.

P. M. MURRAY, MAJOR,
D.A.A.G., 48th Division.

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